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二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

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Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

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Fan translation by

rynn [@rynnamonrolls](#) (up to 140) and suika [@yummysuika](#) (141 onwards)
editor jun [@boootysalad](#)

Author notes by peri [@hinastrond](#) (1-71) and liyou [@wenbuxing](#) (72-140)

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Synopsis

Mo Ran thought becoming Chu Wanning's disciple was a mistake.

His shizun was really too much like a cat while he himself was a dumb pup who'd only slobber and wag his tail.

Dogs and cats were different by nature; originally, the dumb pup didn't want to extend his furry paws to that cat.

He originally thought, dogs should be with dogs, like his shixiong, beautiful and tame like a cute Japanese Spitz, and the two of them together would surely be a match made in heaven.

Yet, after having died and reborn, after having lived two lives, the one he hauled back each time to his den in the end was always the one he couldn't stand at first: that snow-white kitty shizun.

Dumb off the charts husky gong x proud, aggravated, big white cat shou

Emperor of the cultivation world Mo Weiyu deceived elders and slaughtered ancestors, and committed all crimes and sins known to man. After ending his

own life, he was reborn and transmigrated to the year he first became a disciple.

In the shell of a boy held an old and weary soul. After coming back to life, truth after truths that had been hidden below the surface in the previous life floated to the top and broke through the waters one after the other.

Of all the revelations, the one that stunned him the most was that the Shizun he had hated to the bone in his previous life had always been protecting him from the shadows...

The heart of man can change; even demons and monsters can become compassionate and do good. Only, he had sinned deeply. Can the blood on his hands ever be cleansed?

Book I: Different Paths

Ch.1 This Venerable One Dies

>>suicide

That bit of time before Mo Ran had yet to become the emperor, there was always someone calling him a dog.

The manager called him a 'son of a bitch', the customers called him a 'bitch pup', his little cousin called him a 'shitty dog', and his mother was the best, saying he was raised by a bitch.

Of course, there were other dog related metaphors that weren't too bad. For example, his one-night stands would always grumble with some petulance that the strength of his back was like that of a male dog; honey dripped from his lips luring away the soul, but the weapon down below was robbing the sweetness of her life. But, they'd turn around and boast to others afterwards, so much so that the entire district knew that the man Mo Weiyu was both handsome in looks and aggressive in tool; those who tried were satisfied with their meal, and those who hadn't were dearly tempted.

It had to be said that those names were all very spot on. Mo Ran was indeed very much like a tail-wagging dumb dog.

It wasn't until he became the emperor of the cultivation world that these kinds of monikers disappeared in a flash.

One day, a small sect from a faraway land gifted him a puppy.

The puppy had a coat of whitish grey, three slashes of flames upon its forehead, kind of like a wolf. But, it was only as big as a melon, and looked kind

of stupid, chubby and round. Nonetheless, it still thought of itself rather mightily, running all over the great hall with abandon. Several times it tried to climb the very, very high steps to see clearly that person who sat upon the throne so composedly, but because its legs were too short, it finally abandoned the endeavour.

Mo Ran stared at that ball of fur who possessed no wits but plenty of energy and suddenly chuckled, laughing as he called it 'Filthy Mutt'.

The puppy soon grew up and became a big dog; the big dog became an old dog, and the old dog then became a dead dog.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, then blinked them open. His life was filled with the ebb and flow of prestige and shame, sometimes up, sometimes down. Before he knew it, thirty two years had gone past.

He'd played with everything and had gotten tired of it. Everything was tasteless and lonely, and in recent years, there were less and less people he knew by his side; even that three flames dog had passed to the heavens. It was time, he thought. Time to end everything.

He picked off a glistening, full grape, and languidly peeled its purple skin.

His movement was easy and practiced, like King Yu in his camp peeling off Princess Hu's robes, but there was a laziness to it like he was tired of it all. The lustrous fruit quivered lightly in his fingertips; its juice gushed and flowed, delicately purple, like a wild goose gliding down red cliffs, like haitang blossoms entering slumber.

But more so like that of filthy blood.

He stared at his own fingers as he swallowed that overwhelming sweetness in his mouth, then lazily opened his eyes.

It's about time, he thought.
About time he went to hell.

Mo Ran, courtesy name Weiyu.

The first emperor of the cultivation world.

It really hadn't been easy to reach this position. The requirement wasn't simply that of outstanding spiritual powers; he'd also needed a thick skin as hard and solid as that of a meteorite.

Before him, the ten greatest sects in the cultivation world had divided territories, fought and hoarded against each other over their domains. With the sects clashing against one another, there was no one who could rule the world and call all the shots. And besides, every sect leader were outstandingly learned, so even if they wanted to grant themselves a title for fun, they would be wary of what the historians would pen, afraid they would receive disgrace in the books of history.

But Mo Ran was different.
He was a scoundrel.

What others didn't dare do, he'd done it all. Drinking the spiciest fine wine of the mortal realm, marrying the most beautiful woman in the world. First, he became the Alliance Leader of the cultivation world "Taxian-Jun", then he granted himself the title of emperor.

All knelt and yielded before him.

Those who refused to kneel, he slaughtered, one and all. In the years he asserted his dominance, blood flowed like a flood and mournful wails were everywhere. Countless vigilantes sacrificed themselves, even the Rufeng Sect of the Ten Great Sects was completely annihilated.

And later, even the honored master who'd taught Mo Ran wasn't able to escape his demonic claws. In a final battle with Mo Ran he was defeated, and taken prisoner in the palace by his once beloved disciple, his whereabouts now unknown.

The once great land of clear rivers and calm seas was suddenly smothered with smog and haze.

The Dog Emperor Mo Ran didn't read a lot of books and was someone who was fearless of all, so while he was in power, the world was never short of ridiculous affairs. Such as the titles for those reigning years.

The first set of three years, the title was "Bastard"^[1]. It was something he'd thought of while feeding fish by the pond.

The second set of three years, the title was "Croak", the reason being he'd heard frogs croak in the garden in the summer, and determined it as inspiration granted by the heavens and shouldn't be taken for granted.

All the scholars of the country believed there could never be any reigning titles more tragic than "Bastard" and "Croak", but, alas, they understood nothing of Mo Ran.

The third set of three years, grassroots unrest began to shake up various local regions, whether it be buddhists, taoists, or spiritual cultivators, all those righteous vigilantes in the world started to rise up in rebellion.

Thus, this time, Mo Ran contemplated deeply for a long time, and after tossing away many drafts, a title that shook the heavens and made ghosts and gods weep was born—"Cease Battle"^[2].

It was meant to have a well-meaning connotation. The first emperor used up all of his brainpower to come up with those two words, taking from the fortuitous idiom "Cease Troops Rest Battles". Only, when it was spoken out loud in the common world, it was exceedingly awkward.

Especially to those who couldn't read, it was even more awkward hearing the title.

The first year was called the First Cease Battle^[3] year, but why did it sound like the year of Cock Balls.

The second year was called the second year of Cock.

The third year of Cock.

Some people would curse at it behind locked doors, "What complete nonsense! Why not give the title "Ji Ba Chen" to complete the circle! So next time you see a man, no need to ask how old they are, just ask how old his cock is! Hundred year old masters can be called Centennial Cock!"

Finally, three years were suffered through, and it was finally time to replace the reigning year title "Ji Ba".

People all over the world were waiting anxiously to see what His Majesty the Emperor would come up with for the fourth title, but this time, Mo Ran no longer had any care to draw up a name. Since, this year, riots of the cultivation world finally, completely erupted. After having endured for almost a decade, vigilantes, heroes, and valiant men finally gathered together and formed an army of millions, charging towards the First Emperor Mo Weiyu.

The cultivation world really didn't need an emperor.
Especially not a tyrant like this.

After many months of battles bathed in blood, the rebel army finally came to the foot of Sisheng Peak. This place was situated in the Sichuan province, upon perilous mountain bluffs, surrounded by streams of clouds and mist throughout the year. Mo Ran's grand and majestic palace sat at its summit.

It was too late to turn back, and overthrowing tyranny was only a strike away. However, this last strike was also the most treacherous. The ray of hope for victory was before their eyes, but thoughts of estrangement began to grow internally within the allied army who'd gathered to fight the same enemy. With the annihilation of the old empire, a new regime would need to be built. No one wanted to waste their strength unnecessarily right now, and thus no one wanted to head the front lines, to charge up the mountains first.

They were all afraid that this cunningly vicious tyrant would suddenly drop from the skies, bare his shining beast-like white teeth, and rip apart all those who dared to surround and destroy his palace, shred them to pieces.

Some said, with a grim expression, "Mo Weiyu's spiritual powers are great, and his person cunning. We must be cautious lest we fall for his traps."

All the leaders agreed.

Right then, an exceedingly handsome, flashy young man walked forward. He was wearing a set of silver blue light armour, a belt embellished with a lion's head, his hair fastened in a high ponytail with an exquisite silver hairpin secured at the roots.

That young man's expression was exceedingly dark. He said, "We've already come to the foot of the mountain, what are you all moseying about for, dragging your feet in going up? Are you all waiting for Mo Weiyu to climb down himself? What a bunch of scaredy cats!"

Anger exploded all around because of his words.

"Such abuse, young master Xue! What do you mean by scaredy cats? A soldier must always be utmostly prudent. If we're all brash and reckless like you, who'll be responsible if accidents happen?"

Another instantly taunted sarcastically, "Hehe, young master Xue is the darling of the heavens, we are but mere commoners. If the darling of the heavens can't wait to fight the emperor of the mortal realm, then by all means, please go up the mountain first. We'll set up a feast down here by the foot of the mountain to await your gracious return with Mo Weiyu's head, wouldn't that be nice?"

That was a rather aggravating comment. One of the old monks in the alliance immediately stopped the young man who was about to explode, and put on a folksy expression, coaxing him in a gentle voice, "Young master Xue, listen to this old monk. This old monk knows that you and Mo Weiyu share a deep, personal grudge. However, this palace invasion is a critical matter; you must think of everyone, don't let your emotions carry you away."

The one everyone addressed as 'Young Master Xue' was named Xue Meng. Over a decade ago, he'd been praised by all as a young genius, the darling of the heavens.

Yet, as all things change with the flow of time, he must now endure the taunts and ridicule of those people, if only to go up the mountain to see Mo Ran's face one more time.

Xue Meng's face twisted with anger, his lips trembling, but he still arduously suppressed himself, demanding, "Then just how long do you all plan on waiting for?"

"We've got to at least observe any movements, right?"

"Yea, what if Mo Weiyu has set traps?"

The old monk who'd mediated just now also urged, "Young master Xue, don't be impatient. Since we've already come to the foot of the mountain, it's best if we remain cautious. Either way, Mo Weiyu is trapped inside the palace and can't come down. He's now at the end of his rope, nothing will come of anything, so why must we be impatient and act recklessly? There's so many of us down here, with so many nobilities and prominent figures among us, if they lost their lives by accident, who can be responsible?"

Xue Meng exploded with rage, "RESPONSIBLE? THEN LET ME ASK YOU, WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR MY SHIZUN'S LIFE? MO RAN HAS IMPRISONED MY SHIZUN FOR TEN YEARS! A WHOLE TEN YEARS! WITH SHIZUN JUST UP THE MOUNTAIN BEFORE ME, HOW CAN YOU MAKE ME WAIT?"

Hearing Xue Meng mention his shizun, the mob felt a trickle of shame.

Some looked ashamed, some eyed left and right, murmuring but did not speak.

"Ten years ago, Mo Ran titled himself Taxian-Jun. Nevermind slaughtering all seventy-two city fortresses of the Rufeng Sect, he also planned to annihilate the rest of the Ten Great Sects. Later, when Mo Ran made himself emperor, he tried to eradicate all houses. In both disasters, who was the one to stop him in the end? If it wasn't my shizun who fought with his life on the line, would you all still be alive right now? Can you all still stand here and talk to me like it's nothing?"

Finally, someone cleared his throat and said gently, "Young master Xue, don't be angry. In regards to Chu-zongshi, we... all feel guilty, and grateful. Just as you say, he's been imprisoned for ten years, so if anything's happened, it would've already... So, you've already waited for ten years, waiting for another moment won't hurt, don't you think?"

"WHAT I THINK? I THINK IT'S BULLSHIT!"

That man widened his eyes, "Why would you yell like that?"

"WHY WOULDN'T I YELL AT YOU? SHIZUN PUT HIS LIFE ON THE LINE AND IT WAS TO SAVE YOUR KIND OF... Kind of..."

He couldn't continue anymore, a sob constricting his throat, "I'm disheartened on his behalf."

Towards the end, Xue Meng whipped his head around, his shoulders shaking lightly, holding back his tears.

"It's not like we said we weren't going to rescue Chu-zongshi..."

"Yea, we all remember the good Chu-zongshi has done for us, we never forgot. Young master Xue, you're accusing us all of being unjust ingrates, we won't stand for it!"

"But speaking of which, isn't Mo Ran also Chu-zongshi's disciple?" Someone whispered. "I gotta say, as a master, he should be responsible for his criminal disciple. As they say, an undisciplined son is the father's fault; an improperly educated son is due to the negligence of the teacher. The whole thing couldn't be helped, so what's there to complain about?"

Now that was harsh, and someone instantly shouted, "WHAT NONSENSE ARE YOU SPOUTING? MIND YOUR TONGUE!"

Then he turned to console Xue Meng with a pleasant face, "Young master Xue, don't be impatient..."

Xue Meng cut him off, his eyes bulging, "HOW CAN I NOT BE IMPATIENT? THIS DOESN'T CONCERN ANY OF YOU SO IT DOESN'T HURT, BUT THAT'S MY SHIZUN! MINE!!! I HAVEN'T SEEN HIM FOR SO MANY YEARS! I DON'T KNOW WHETHER IF HE'S ALIVE OR DEAD, I DON'T KNOW HOW HE IS! WHAT DO YOU ALL THINK I'M STANDING HERE FOR?"

He breathing was harsh, the rims of his eyes red. "Did you all think that by just waiting here, Mo Weiyu will come down the mountain himself and kneel in front of you all to beg for mercy?"

"Young master Xue..."

"Besides shizun, I've no family left in this world." Xue Meng broke free from the old monk's hold on his sleeves and croaked, "You won't go, I'll go myself."

Throwing that out there, he went up the mountain alone; one man, one sword.

Through the rustling cries of bleak and wet cold winds mixed with millions of leaves, the thick fog crept like countless angry ghosts and aggrieved spirits within the trees, muttering in hushed voices.

Xue Meng hiked to the peak all by his lonesome. The majestic palace Mo Ran was in had calm candlelight illuminating the night. He suddenly saw that before the Heaven-Piercing Tower were three graves. When he approached for a closer look, at the head of the first grave were long weeds growing, and the tombstone was engraved with crooked and dogged words: "Grave of the Steamed [4] Consort Chu".

In contrast to this "Steamed Consort", the second grave was newly dug, the earth only just sealed, and upon the tombstone engraved: "Grave of the Deep Fried Empress Song".

"..."

If this was over ten years ago, Xue Meng would've laughed out loud in spite of himself upon seeing such a ridiculous sight.

At the time, he and Mo Ran were disciples under the same shizun, and Mo Ran was the class clown. Even if Xue Meng had long since disliked him, he would still be teased to laughter by him from time to time.

Who knows what this Steamed Consort Deep Fried Empress was all about. Perhaps the style in which the Scholar Mo had graced his two wives were the same as "Bastard", "Croak" and "Cease Battle". However, as to why he would give those monikers to his own empresses, there was no way of knowing.

Xue Meng turned his gaze to the third grave.

Under the night sky, the earth of that grave mound was still dug open. There was a coffin resting within, but there was no body in that coffin, and the tombstone was also yet to be marked.

Before the grave was a small pot of Pear Blossom White Wine, a bowl of now cold spicy wontons, a few plates of spicy side dishes -- they were all Mo Ran's favourites.

Xue Meng stared at the grave stunned, and suddenly his mind snapped to -- could it be that Mo Ran had no intention of fighting, and had long since dug his own grave, ready to die?

Cold sweat rolled.

He would not believe it. Mo Ran had always been someone who never knew fatigue even at the brink of death. He knew not of surrender, and based on the way he acted, he would've for sure fought with the rebel army to the bitter end, so why would...

These past ten years, Mo Ran had stood at the summit of power. What exactly did he see? And what exactly had happened?

No one knew.

Xue Meng turned around and reentered the darkness, stalking in large strides towards the brightly lit Wushan Palace.

Inside Wushan Palace, Mo Ran's eyes were screwed shut, his face deathly pale.

Xue Meng had guessed right. Mo Ran was determined to die. That grave mound was dug by himself. Two hours ago, he had used the communication spell to dismiss his servants, while he swallowed deadly poison. His cultivation was great, and so the effects of that poison were particularly slow in dissolving and circulating within his body. Thus, the agony of having his inner organs chewed away was also acutely vivid.

Creak-- the doors to the hall opened.

Mo Ran didn't look up and only gasped hoarsely, "Xue Meng. It's you, right? Have you come?"

Upon the golden pavement within the hall, Xue Meng stood tall and proud, his ponytail falling straight, his light armour shimmering.

It was a reunion of companions from the same sect once upon a time. Mo Ran sat leaning, propping up his chin, his expression empty, thick curtains of fine lashes lowered before his eyes.

Everyone knew he was a monster and a savage devil, but in truth, he was good looking. The curve of his nose gentle and soft, his lips thin and dewy, his appearance naturally radiating notes of kindness and sweetness. Just by looking at his face, anyone would think he was a lovable, good person.

When Xue Meng saw his face, he knew Mo Ran had taken poison just as he had suspected. It was hard to dissect what he was feeling, and he opened his mouth to speak, but no words came out. In the end, he clenched his fists and only demanded, "Where's shizun?"

"...What?"

Xue Meng demanded again sharply, "I SAID, WHERE'S SHIZUN??? YOURS, MINE, OUR SHIZUN!!"

"Oh." Mo Ran humped softly, and finally, slowly, blinked open his eyes, his pupils black with hints of purple, dropping them onto Xue Meng's person through layers upon layers of time past.

"Now that I think of it, ever since the farewell at Taxue Palace on Mount Kunlun, it's been two years since you and Shizun have seen each other."

Mo Ran smiled faintly as he spoke.

"Xue Meng, do you miss him?"

"STOP YOUR NONSENSE! GIVE HIM BACK TO ME!"

Mo Ran glanced at him calmly, enduring the twisting pain in his stomach, and his lips contorted into a sneer as he laid heavily back against the emperor's throne.

Waves of blackness invaded his sight, he could almost feel his innards wrenching, melting, dissolving into stinking, bloody swill.

Mo Ran replied lazily, "Give him back to you? Foolish. Why don't you use your brain to think a little? Shizun and I share such deep hatred for each other, why would I allow him to live in this world?"

"YOU--!" Blood completely drained from Xue Meng's face, his eyes bulging as he backed up, "You can't have... You wouldn't..."

"I wouldn't what?" Mo Ran snickered. "Why don't you tell me, why wouldn't I?"

Xue Meng's voice trembled. "But he's your... He's your shizun after all... How could you bear to kill him??"

He looked up to Mo Ran who was sitting high above in the seat of the emperor. There was Fuxi in Heaven, Yanluo in Hell, and in the mortal realm, there was Mo Weiyu.

But to Xue Meng, even if Mo Ran had become the eminent emperor of the mortal realm, he still shouldn't have become like this.

Xue Meng's entire body was shaking, his tears rolling from outrage, "Mo Weiyu, are you still human? He once..."

Mo Ran raised his eyes quietly, "He once what?"

Xue Meng's voice trembled, "You should very well know how he once treated you..."

Mo Ran suddenly laughed, "Are you trying to remind me that he once beat me so hard my body was covered in blood, that he made me kneel before all to admit my crimes? Or did you want to remind me that he once, for you, for irrelevant people, three times he stood in my way, ruined my great endeavours?"

Xue Meng shook his head in pain, "..."

No, Mo Ran.

Think back properly. Let go of your vicious hatred. Look back.

He once trained you in cultivation and martial arts, and made sure to protect you.

He once taught you how to read and write, taught you poetry and painting.

He once learned how to cook just for you, even though he was so clumsy and got cuts all over his hands.

He once... He once waited every day for you to come home, all alone by himself, from nightfall...til the break of dawn...

So many words stuck in his throat, but in the end, Xue Meng could only sob, "His... his temper is bad, and his words are harsh, but even I know he treated you really well, so why... how could you..."

Xue Meng raised his head, but having held back so many tears, his throat was even more constricted, and he couldn't say anymore.

It was a long pause before Mo Ran's silent sigh floated from the throne.
"Yea."

"But Xue Meng. Did you know?" Mo Ran's voice was clearly exhausted. "He had also once ended the life of the only person I've ever loved. The only one."

It was silent like the dead for a long time.

The pain in his stomach was like a blazing fire, his blood and flesh torn and ripped into broken shreds.

"Still, we were master and disciple once. His corpse is resting in the Red Lotus Pavilion in the Southern Peak. He's lying among the lotus blossoms, very well preserved, like he's only fallen asleep." Mo Ran caught his breath and forced himself to calm down. When he said this, his expression was blank, but

his fingers were digging into the long rosewood desk, his joints pale to the point of bruising.

"His corpse is maintained by my spiritual powers. If you miss him, don't waste your breath here with me. Go now before I die."

A lump of astringent sweetness swarmed up into his throat; Mo Ran coughed a couple times, and when he opened his mouth again, there was nothing but blood between his lips and teeth. Yet his eyes were still at ease.

He said with a hoarse voice, "Go. Go see him. If you're too late and I die, breaking off the spiritual powers, he will turn into dust."

Then, he closed his eyes dispiritedly, the poison striking his heart, blazing fires bringing torment.

The agony was so heart wrenching that even Xue Meng's twisted, despairing wails became faraway, like there was an ocean spanning thousands of miles between them, and his voice was coming through the waters.

Blood continued to pour out from the corners of his lips, and Mo Ran squeezed his sleeves tight, his muscles spasming.

When he opened his bleary eyes, Xue Meng was long gone. That bastard's qinggong^[5] wasn't bad; it wouldn't take him too long to run from here to the Southern Peak.

He should be able to see Shizun one last time.

Mo Ran pushed himself up, and wobbled as he rose to his feet. Using hands spotted with blood, he formed a hand seal, sending himself to the front of Sisheng Peak's Heaven-Piercing Tower.

It was deep autumn. The haitang blossoms were beautifully thick and flowing in the wind.

He didn't know why in the end he chose this place to end his sinful life, but he felt since the flowers were blooming so vibrantly, it wouldn't be such a bad tomb.

He laid down in that open coffin, and looked up to watch the blossoms of the night, soundlessly drifting as they wilted.

Drifting into the coffin, drifting onto his cheeks. Dancing and fluttering, like the past wilting away.

In this life, from the bastard son who possessed nothing, after innumerable encounters, he became the only eminent Lord Emperor of the mortal realm.

He had blasphemed, and his hands were covered with blood. All that he loved, all that he hated, all that he prayed for, all that he resented, in the end, there was nothing left.

In the end, he had also never penned an epitaph for himself using that confident and wild writing of his. Whether it be a shameless "Emperor of the Era" or something ridiculous like "Deep Fried" or "Steamed", he didn't write anything. The grave of the first emperor of the cultivation world, in the end, left no words behind.

A spectacle that lasted for a decade finally dropped its curtains.

It was many, many hours later when the mob, with torches held high, invaded the resident palace of the emperor like a fire snake. However, what awaited them was an empty Wushan Palace, a Sisheng Peak without a soul, and Xue Meng, who had cried himself numb, prostrating over a ground spilled with ashes at the Red Lotus Pavilion.

And, before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, Mo Weiyu, whose corpse was already cold.

Ch.2 This Venerable One Lives

>>warning: 15 year old Mo Ran fucks a prostitute

“My heart had already stilled and my thoughts turned to ash, yet unexpectedly the light of spring shines through the cold night. Could it be that the heavens pity the blade of grass in the secluded valley? Yet I fear only that the world is unpredictable and full of hardships.”

A woman’s crisp voice passed by his ear, poetic verses rolling like pearls and jade, but all they did was make Mo Ran’s head throb, the vein by his brow twitching madly.

“What’s with all the noise! Where’d this wailing banshee even come from! Servants, kick this bitch off the mountain!”

Only after bellowing so did Mo Ran realize with a start that something wasn’t right.

...Hadn’t he died?

Hatred and coldness, pain and loneliness stabbed at his chest. Mo Ran’s eyes flew open.

Everything that had happened right before his death scattered like snow in the wind. He found himself lying on a bed; not the bed at Sisheng Peak, but a bed carved with a dragon and phoenix, the wood smelling heavily of powder. The old quilt was colored pink and purple, embroidered with mandarin ducks—the kind of bed one would only find in a whorehouse.

“...”

Mo Ran froze.

He knew where this was.

This was the entertainment district near Sisheng Peak.

So-called entertainment district just meant brothel, easy come easy go.

Mo Ran had had a period of debauchery in his youth, and had spent the greater portion of half a month at this establishment. But this place had been sold and converted into a wine shop when he was twenty-something. How did he end up here of all places after death?

Had he transgressed too much in life, wronged too many people, and so the king of the underworld was punishing him to reincarnate into a whorehouse and take customers?

Mo Ran turned over as his imagination ran wild.

And unexpectedly came face to face with a slumbering person.

“...”

What the hell!!! Why was there a person next to him??

A man, totally naked!

He was lovely and pleasing to the eye, and quite androgynous.

Mo Ran showed no expression, but his heart was full of turmoil. He stared at that pretty boy’s face for a while and suddenly remembered.

Wasn't this the boy toy he'd doted on when he was young, named... Rong San?

Or was it Rong Jiu?

It didn't matter if it was San or Jiu, what mattered was, this prostitute got an STD and died years ago, even his bones should've rotted away by now. Yet, here he was, delicately curled by his side, neck and shoulders dotted with blue and purple, full of love bites.

Mo Ran pulled a long face, lifted the quilt, and peeked downwards.

"..."

This Rong someone, don't know if he's Jiu or San, let's just call him Rong Jiu. Rong Jiu's pretty little body was covered in rope burns, and his pale, tender thighs were still tied intricately with red rope.

Mo Ran stroked his chin: how interesting.

Look at this exquisite rope art, the skilled technique, the familiar scene. Didn't he fucking do this himself??!!

As a cultivator, he had read about the concept of rebirth. He began to suspect that he had somehow gone back in time.

To confirm his suspicions, Mo Ran found a copper mirror. The mirror was worn, but good enough to vaguely make out his appearance.

Mo Ran had been thirty two when he died, but the face in the mirror was quite young; it was a charming face exuding a youthful arrogance, looking no more than fifteen or sixteen.

There was no one else in the room. Thus, the once cruel ruler of the cultivation world, Evil Tyrant of Bashu, Emperor of the Mortal Realm, Lord of Sisheng Peak, Taxian-Jun Mo Ran himself, after much consideration, expressed his thoughts honestly.

"Fuck....."

The sleeping Rong Jiu got "fuck"-ed awake.

The pretty thing sat up languidly, the thin quilt sliding off of his shoulder to reveal an expanse of pale skin. He gathered his long, soft hair and, lifting his peach blossom eyes smudged with red ink, he yawned.

"Oh...Mo-gongzi, you're up early today."

Mo Ran did not respond. Back then, he had indeed liked Rong Jiu's type: delicate and androgynous. But now, the thirty two year old Taxian-Jun couldn't figure out what the hell he had been thinking to find this kind of man attractive.

"Did you not sleep well last night? Nightmare?"

This Venerable One fucking died, how about that for a nightmare.

Rong Jiu thought his continued silence was because he was in a bad mood, so he slipped off the bed to stand before the carved window, wrapping his arms around Mo Ran from behind.

"Mo-gongzi, pay attention to me~ what are you spacing out for?"

Mo Ran's face turned blue at this embrace. He wanted nothing more than to rip this hussy off of himself and grant that fragile-looking face some seventeen, eighteen slaps, but managed to suppress the urge.

He still felt a bit dizzy and uncertain of the situation.

After all, if he really had been reborn, then he couldn't just beat Rong Jiu up out of the blue after spending the previous day all lovey-dovey with him. It would make it seem like he'd lost his marbles. Definitely couldn't have that.

Mo Ran arranged his expression, putting on a pretense of forgetfulness: "What day is it?"

Rong Jiu stared for a second, then smiled: "Fourth of May."

"Thirty third year?"

"That was last year. It's the thirty fourth year now. They do say that great men tend to be forgetful."

The thirty fourth year...

The gears in Mo Ran's head turned rapidly.

That year, he'd turned sixteen, and had just been identified as the Sisheng Peak Leader's long-lost nephew, transforming from a pathetic, bullied dog to a phoenix on the branch overnight.

So then, he really had been reborn?

Or, was it just a hollow dream in death...

Rong Jiu smiled: "Mo-gongzi is so hungry he doesn't even remember the date anymore. Wait here a minute, I'll go fetch some food. How does fried pancake sound?"

Mo Ran had just been reborn, and wasn't sure how to deal with all of this yet. But, it should be fine if he just followed the same approach as before. So he thought back to his charismatic style back then and, suppressing his disgust, playfully pinched Rong Jiu's thigh.

"Sounds delicious! I want congee too, and I want you to feed me."

Rong Jiu pulled on some clothes and left, soon returning with a tray carrying a bowl of pumpkin congee, two youxuan pastries, and a plate of side dish.

Mo Ran happened to be a bit hungry and was about to dig into the pastries when Rong Jiu brushed his hand away: "Allow me to serve Gongzi."

"....."

Rong Jiu picked up a pancake and sat on Mo Ran's lap. He wore nothing but a thin robe, legs spread wide open and flush against Mo Ran, even rubbing against him now and again without subtlety.

Mo Ran stared at his face.

Rong Jiu thought he was getting horny again: "What're you staring at me for? The food's going to get cold."

Mo Ran was silent for a moment. Remembering the "good deed" Rong Jiu had done behind his back in his previous lifetime, the corners of his lips curved into a sweet smile.

He, the great Taxian-Jun, was no stranger to disgusting acts. As long as he felt like it, there was nothing too disgusting for him to do. This right now was merely putting on a show; mere child's play.

Mo Ran casually leaned back against the chair, smiling. "Sit."

"I...I'm already sitting."

"You know where I'm telling you to sit."

Rong Jiu blushed. "Why the rush, how about Gongzi finishes eating fir-...ah!"

Before he could even finish, Mo Ran pulled him forward and pressed him back down. Rong Jiu's hand shook and knocked over the bowl of congee. He managed between gasps, "Mo-gongzi, the bowl..."

"Doesn't matter."

"B-but you should still eat first..... nn..... ah....."

"Aren't I eating right now?" Mo Ran held onto his waist, the sight of Rong Jiu's extended neck and lovely visage reflected in his pitch black pupils.

In his previous lifetime, he'd liked to kiss those captivating red lips during intimacy. After all, Rong Jiu was pretty and knew just the right words to say. It would be a lie to say that Mo Ran had never felt anything for him.

But now that Mo Ran knew what these lips had done behind his back, he found them unbearably foul, and definitely had no interest in kissing them.

The thirty two year old Mo Ran was different from the sixteen year old Mo Ran in many aspects.

For example, the sixteen year old him still knew gentleness in love and intimacy. However, the thirty two year old him had only violence left.

Afterwards, looking at Rong Jiu who had passed out from getting fucked to within an inch of his life, his tumultuous eyes curved faintly, even carrying a hint of a sweet smile. He was very good-looking when he smiled, eyes a deep, rich black with a sheen of arrogant purple from certain angles. Right now, he dragged Rong Jiu onto the bed by his hair, and casually picked up a shard of the broken bowl from the ground, holding it by Rong Jiu's face.

He had always avenged every grievance; right now was no different.

Thinking about how much he had taken care of Rong Jiu and his business in the last lifetime, how he'd even thought about buying his freedom, and how Rong Jiu had paid him back by scheming against him with others, his eyes couldn't help but curve into a smile as he pressed the shard against Rong Jiu's cheek.

This person's body was his business; without this face, he would have nothing.

He would be forced to wander the streets like a dog, to crawl on the ground, get kicked, and suffer all kinds of spurn and abuse...he was so delighted by the mere thought that even the disgust he felt from fucking this person just now vanished like smoke.

Mo Ran's smile became even more lovely.

Just a tad of pressure, and a thread of blood, captivately red, seeped out.

The unconscious person seemed to have felt the pain and groaned softly in a hoarse voice, looking quite pitiful, with tears still clinging to his eyelashes.

Mo Ran's hand suddenly stopped.

He remembered a dear friend.

"....."

Then, he suddenly realized what he was in the middle of doing. It took a few seconds of him being in a daze before he finally, slowly, lowered his hand.

He had done so much evil that it had become habitual. He even forgot that he had been reborn.

Right now, everything had yet to happen, the irrevocable mistakes had not yet been committed, and that person...still lived. There was no need to walk the same cruel path; he could do it over.

He sat down and propped his foot on the bed, absentmindedly toying with the piece of broken porcelain in his hand. Suddenly noticing the oily pancake that still sat on the table, he grabbed it, peeled off the wax paper, and tore into it with his teeth, eating until crumbs flew everywhere and his lips got shiny with grease.

The pancake was this brothel's specialty. It was nothing special, especially compared to the delicacies he tasted later on. But ever since this place had gone bankrupt, Mo Ran never got to eat it again. Now, the familiar taste of the pancake, through the turbulent events of the past, once again returned to the tip of his tongue.

The unreal feeling of rebirth lessened with every swallow.

By the time he finished the pancake, he finally woke up from the stupor he had been in this whole time.

He really had been reborn.

Everything hateful in his life, everything that he couldn't take back, all of it had not yet come to pass.

He had not yet killed his uncle and aunt, not yet razed seventy two cities to the ground, not yet betrayed his teacher and ancestors, not yet gotten married, not yet...

No one had died yet.

He savored the taste in his mouth, licking along his teeth and feeling the thread of joy in his chest ballooning rapidly into a feverish excitement. He'd rebuked Heaven and Earth in his last life, dipping into all three of the forbidden techniques of the human realm. He had mastered each of the other two; only the last one, "rebirth", had eluded him regardless of his talent.

Unexpectedly, that which he had failed to obtain in life fell effortlessly into his lap in death.

All the distaste, the repugnance, the desolation, the loneliness, all of his complicated feelings from his previous life were locked in his chest. The sight of the army marching on Sisheng Peak, fire lit for ten thousand fathoms, still remained in his mind.

That time, he really had not wanted to live anymore. The people all said that his very existence cursed all who came close to him, that he was fated to die alone. Everyone had turned their backs on him. Toward the end, even he himself had felt like the walking dead: senseless, lonesome.

He didn't know what had gone wrong and where, for an irredeemably wicked person like himself to get the chance to redo everything after ending his own life.

Why destroy Rong Jiu's face over such a measly grudge from so long ago?

Rong Jiu loved money. He would just not pay this time, and take some silver on top, to teach him a lesson. As for his life, he didn't want that burden just yet.

"I'm letting you off easy, Rong Jiu."

Mo Ran said with a smile, tossing the porcelain shard out the window.

Then he emptied out Rong Jiu's jewels and valuables, tucking all of it into his pouch. He took his time dressing and arranging himself before leisurely strolling out of the place.

Uncle, aunt, cousin Xue Meng, Shizun, and...

Mo Ran's eyes softened at the thought of that person.

Shige^[6], I'm coming.

Author's Notes:

This story's ship is: Mo Ran x Shizun

There is a white lotus Shige, do not board the wrong ship.

Ch.3 This Venerable One's Shige

>>warning: violence/gore involving children

Hm... since his soul had been transported back in time, maybe his cultivation had come along for the ride too?

Mo Ran recited an incantation and felt the spiritual energy in his body rush forth. It was abundant, but not strong. That was to say, his cultivation had not carried over.

No matter. He was smart and perceptive, and blessed with innate talent; he could just cultivate all over again, it was no big deal. Rebirth was a blessed event of unparalleled proportions, some small imperfection was perfectly normal. Thinking so, Mo Ran quickly rearranged his gloomy and fierce expression into one more appropriate for a sixteen year old youth, and cheerfully headed back toward his sect.

It was the midst of summer. Horse-drawn carriages sped past, wheels rolling, and no one paid any attention to the sixteen year old Mo Ran.

Only the occasional village woman, taking a break from tending the fields and looking up to wipe her sweat, would notice this exceptionally handsome youth and stare a bit.

Mo Ran returned the stares with a smile and no restraint, until those married women blushed bright red and looked away.

Mo Ran arrived at Wuchang Town around evening. The town was close to Sisheng Peak, the towering peaks in the distance framed by clouds lit on fire by the blood-red sun. He touched his empty stomach and headed into a restaurant. Glancing at the menu and knocking on the counter, he placed a quick order. "Shopkeep, a pounded chicken, a plate of beef tripe in chili sauce, two catties of soju, and a plate of sliced beef."

This area was a popular rest stop, and it was currently bustling with activity. A storyteller was on the stage, shaking his fan and telling the story of Sisheng Peak in an animated manner, spit flying everywhere.

Mo Ran picked a private room by a window, and listened as he ate.

"As I'm sure everyone already knows, the cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Today we'll talk about the greatest sect in the lower cultivation realm, Sisheng Peak. Did you know that a hundred years ago, our Wuchang Town was a poor and desolate place due to its proximity to the

entrance of the demon realm? No one dared to go out after dark. If they really needed to travel at night, then they had to shake an exorcism bell and sprinkle incense ash and paper money while chanting, ‘people barred by mountains, demons barred by paper’ while passing through as quickly as they could. But these days, our town is bustling and flourishing, no different from anywhere else, and it’s all thanks to Sisheng Peak’s care. This righteous sect stands right at the gate to the demon realm, between the boundary of yin and yang. Even though the sect was only established not that long ago...”

Mo Ran had heard this history so many times that his ears had damn near grown calluses, and so he started glancing around outside the window instead. It just so happened that right then, there was a stall set up below where several strangers from out of town, dressed in cultivator garb, were carrying a cage covered with a black cloth as they performed streetside tricks.

This was much more interesting than the storyteller’s tale.

Mo Ran’s attention was drawn over.

“Come one, come all! Take a look at these pixiu cubs, fierce mythical beasts tamed by us to obediently perform tricks and even do math! It’s not easy travelling to perform chivalrous deeds, everyone spare some tips and stick around. Come watch the first trick——pixiu abacus!”

The cultivators ripped off the black cloth with a flourish to reveal a couple of human-faced, bear-bodied monsters in the cage.

Mo Ran: “.....”

Just meek fuzzy bear cubs like these?? And you actually dared claim that they’re pixiu???

That was quite the bullshit right there, only donkey brains would believe that.

But Mo Ran’s views were widened soon enough, as twenty, thirty donkey brains gathered to watch, cheering and clapping, drawing the attention of everyone in the restaurant as well, making things quite awkward for the storyteller.

“The leader of Sisheng Peak right now is a man known far and wide for his strength and brilliance——”

“Nice!! Again!!!”

Encouraged, the storyteller glanced toward the owner of the voice, only to find a customer whose face glowed red with excitement, but whose gaze was locked onto the street performers below, not on himself.

“Oh? The pixiu is doing math on the abacus?”

“Wow, quite impressive!”

“Good show! Make the pixiu toss apples again!”

The entire restaurant was laughing, everyone gathered by the windows to watch the scene below. The storyteller pathetically tried to carry on: “The master is best known for that fan of his, he.....”

“Ahahaha, that light-colored pixiu wants to eat the apple, look at it rolling around on the ground!”

The storyteller wiped his face with a towel, his lips trembling from anger.

Mo Ran pursed his lips and smiled, leisurely calling out from behind the bead curtain, "Forget Sisheng Peak, tell a story from 《Eighteen Caresses》 instead, I guarantee it'll pull everyone's attention back."

The storyteller didn't know that the person behind the curtain was the young master of Sisheng Peak, Mo Ran himself, and gathered all the moral integrity he had to stutter out, "V-vulgar stories are not fit for an elegant hall."

Mo Ran laughed. "You're calling this place an elegant hall? How are you not embarrassed."

A burst of noise came from below.
"Ah! What a fast horse!"
"Must be a cultivator from Sisheng Peak!"

In the midst of the chatter, a black horse galloped from the direction of Sisheng Peak and broke into the streetside circus like lightning!

There were two people on the horse, one wearing a black bamboo hat and shrouded in a black cloak, covered so completely that it was impossible to tell their age or gender. The other was a thirty or forty year old woman, with rough hands and a weathered face.

The woman started crying as soon as she saw the man-bears. She scrambled off the horse and stumbled toward them, kneeling to embrace one of them in her arms, wailing, "My son!!! Oh, my son—"

The audience was stumped. Someone muttered while scratching his head, "Eh? Aren't these pixiu cubs? Why's this woman calling it son?"

"Maybe it's a pixiu mother?"

"Aiyo, that's quite something then, if the female can even take on a human form."

These villagers had no knowledge or experience, and were only babbling nonsense, but Mo Ran figured it out immediately.

Rumor had it that some cultivators out there liked to abduct children, rip their tongues out so that they couldn't talk, burn their skin off with boiling water, and then stick animal hides on their bloodied bodies so that child and fur became one once the blood had congealed, looking just like a monster. These children couldn't speak or write, and had no choice but to suffer the abuse and obediently perform tricks like "pixiu abacus"; any resistance would only earn them a beating.

No wonder he hadn't sensed any demonic energy, these "pixiu" weren't monsters at all, but actually living humans.....

While he was thinking to himself, the person in the black cloak whispered something to the cultivators, who flew into a fury. "Apologize? That ain't in my vocabulary!" "So what if you're from Sisheng Peak?" "Mind your own damn business! Beat him up!" They pounced on the black cloaked person for a beating.

"Aiyo."

Watching his fellow disciple get beat up, Mo Ran only let out a low chuckle. "How scary."

He had zero intention of helping out. He'd always loathed the righteous and meddlesome ways of his sect, even in the previous life. The lot of them rushed to throw themselves at any trouble that cropped up, like so many idiots. Even some minor inconvenience like Mrs. Wang's cat getting stuck in the tree was something to bother them with. The entire sect, from the leader all the way down to the servants, every last one of them was a dimwit.

There were so many unfair things in the world, what do you care? It was enough to tire a person to death.

“They’re fighting, they’re fighting! Hoh! What a punch!”
Inside and outside the restaurant, everyone gathered to spectate.

“So many of you ganging up on one person, aren’t you ashamed?”

“Watch out behind you sir! Aiya! Close call! Wah——”

“Nice dodge!”

These people loved a good fight, but Mo Ran didn’t care to watch. He’d seen plenty of blood-letting; the events currently unfolding were like a fly’s buzzing to him. He lazily dusted peanut crumbs off his clothes and got up to leave.

Downstairs, the cultivators and the black cloaked person were at a stalemate, swords swishing. Mo Ran crossed his arms and leaned against the restaurant’s door, took one glance and clicked his tongue in annoyance.

What a disgrace.

Everyone from Sisheng Peak was a fierce fighter, each the equal of ten men, but the black cloaked person was a pathetic fighter. Even when dragged off the horse, surrounded and kicked, the person was still holding back.

They only called out politely, “Honorable men speak with their mouths, not their fists. I’m trying to reason with you, why won’t you listen?!”

Cultivators: “.....”

Mo Ran: “.....”

The cultivators were thinking, the hell? This person’s already so soundly thrashed and still preaching that nonsense? He must have mantou for brains, empty inside?

But Mo Ran’s face changed abruptly, his head spinning for a second. He held his breath, eyes wide with disbelief—that voice...

“Shi Mei!” Mo Ran shouted and rushed forward, agitated. He let loose an attack filled with spiritual power that instantly knocked away five of the jianghu cultivator swindlers, and knelt on the ground to help up the black cloaked person who was covered in muddy boot marks, and his voice couldn’t help but tremble slightly—

“Shi Mei, is that you?”

Ch.4 This Venerable One’s Cousin

This Shi Mei [name] was not that kind of shimei [junior sister].

Shi Mei was genuinely male and, considering when he’d joined the sect, he was actually Mo Ran’s shixiong.

The reason he had such an unfortunate name was due to the Sisheng Peak Leader’s lack of erudition.

Shi Mei was an orphan, and the Peak Leader had found him in the wild. He had been a weak and sickly child, and so the Peak Leader had thought he would

give this child a humble name, as humble names bring an easier life.

As a child he had been very pretty, like a darling young lass, lovable and charming. After much thinking, the leader eventually came up with the name Xue Ya^[7].

As Xue Ya grew older and older, so too did he grow more and more beautiful. He possessed a slim figure, and the tips of his brows and the corners of his eyes were well-shaped, giving him a graceful mien. The overall effect was of a striking and peerless natural beauty.

The crude, uncultured farmers of the villages didn't think it wrong to use the name Xue Ya, but had anyone ever heard of a legendary beauty named "Dog Balls" or "Steel Cocks"?

His fellow sect disciples didn't think it appropriate and gradually stopped calling him "Xue Ya". But since it had been a name bestowed by the Peak Leader, they didn't dare presume to change it, and so they half jokingly started calling him shimei instead.

Shimei this, shimei that; after a while, out of kind consideration, the Peak Leader shook out his long sleeves and kindly offered, "Xue Ya, why don't you change your name to Shi Mei once and for all? Using the character "mei" from the word meng mei, as in latent, what do you think?"

He actually had the gall to ask.....what normal person wouldn't abhor such a name? Still, Shi Mei had a sweet temper, and when he saw that the Peak Leader was watching him with excited cheer, thinking that he'd done an amazing deed, Shi Mei didn't have the heart to decline. Even if he felt aggrieved, he couldn't embarrass the Peak Leader, so he knelt and accepted the name with grace. From that day on, his name was changed to Shi Mei.

The person in the black cloak coughed a few times, finally catching his breath. His gaze fell onto Mo Ran. "Mn? A-Ran? What are you doing here?"

Behind a thin layer of organza, a pair of eyes gentle as spring water and bright as the night stars pierced into the depths of Mo Ran's heart.

With this one look, the seal on Taxian-Jun's hidden feelings and tender affections was suddenly broken.

It was Shi Mei.
There was no mistake.

Mo Ran was a scoundrel. In his past life, he'd played around with many men and women. That he hadn't died from too much sex had come as a surprise, even to him.

However, the only person he'd ever given his heart to, he did not dare to touch.

He and Shi Mei had been close, their relationship ambiguously romantic. However, up until Shi Mei's death, Mo Ran had only ever held his hand and the one time their lips had brushed in a kiss, it had been an accident.

Mo Ran felt that he was dirty and sullied, while Shi Mei was pure and gentle; Mo Ran was not fit to be with him.

In life, Shi Mei had been treasured and cherished by Mo Ran, and all the more so after his death. Then, he'd become Taxian-Jun's moonlight. No matter how much he desperately tried to relive memories of him, the deceased still belonged to the past, dissolved to nothing more than a lump of earth. In the underworld below, traces of that transcendent figure had long been obscured.

But in this moment, Shi Mei was standing in front of him, alive once more. It was only with great effort and all of Mo Ran's willpower that he could hold back his emotions, restrain himself.

Mo Ran helped Shi Mei up and patted away the dust on his cloak, heart aching with an almost physical pain.

"If I hadn't been here, they would have bullied you even more! Why didn't you hit them back?"

"I wanted to try reasoning with them first....."

"You can't reason with these people! Are you injured? Where does it hurt?"

"Cough cough, A-Ran, I.....I'm fine."

Mo Ran turned his head, his expression ferocious. He said to the cultivators, "You dare lay hands on someone from Sisheng Peak? Some nerves you've got there."

"A-Ran..... don't mind it....."

"You guys wanna fight? Come on then! Fight me!"

The group of cultivators had taken just one blow from Mo Ran, but that one blow had been enough to make them aware that his cultivation skills were far beyond theirs. They retreated, afraid to get into a brawl with him.

Shi Mei sighed, and advised, "A-Ran, cease the quarrelling, forgive and forget."

Mo Ran turned back to Shi Mei, and couldn't help but feel a forlorn sort of distress in his heart, the corners of his eyes feeling all hot.

Shi Mei had always been kind hearted. In his past life, at his deathbed, there had been no resentment, no hatred. He'd tried to persuade Mo Ran to not hate their Shizun, who could've clearly saved Shi Mei's life but who had instead chosen to stand at the side, not lifting a finger.

"But they....."

"I'm okay though, see, nothing happened. Having less problems is better than having more problems, please listen to this shige."

Mo Ran sighed. "Alright, I'll listen to you, I'll listen to everything you say." He shook his head, then shot a glare at the cultivators. "You hear that? My shige has pleaded for leniency on your behalf! Hurry up and get lost! What are you still here for? Are you waiting for me to accompany you out?"

"Yes, yes! We're leaving, we're leaving!"

"Hang on," Shi Mei said to the group of cultivators.

They assumed that, after having beaten Shi Mei up, he was not about to let them go easily. Thus, they knelt onto the floor, bowing as they said, "Xianjun, xianjun! We were in the wrong, we were ignorant. Please let us go!"

"You didn't listen to me earlier when I tried to reason with you." Shi Mei sighed. "You kidnapped someone's child, breaking their parents' hearts. How can you live with this on your conscience?"

"We're sorry! We're sorry! Xianjun, we made a mistake! We will never do it again! We will never do it again!"

"From now on you must live a clean life, no more evil deeds, do you understand?"

"Of course! You've taught us a good lesson! We, we've learned our lesson! We've learned our lesson!"

"Then, please apologize to this Madam, and heal her children with care."

And so the incident finally came to an end. Mo Ran helped Shi Mei up onto his horse, then rented another one from the pit stop. The two headed back to their sect, side by side.

The moon shone high up in the sky, its light piercing through the leaves to scatter onto the footpath.

As they went, Mo Ran began to feel an elation growing inside him. He'd initially thought he wouldn't be able to see Shi Mei until he was back at Sisheng Peak. He hadn't expected Shi Mei to come down to the base of the mountain for errands, and run into him by chance. This only cemented Mo Ran's belief that he and Shi Mei really were fated.

Even though Shi Mei and himself weren't technically an item right now, they'd already snogged in their past life. By all indications, it was going to be smooth sailing this lifetime as well, it was all just a matter of time.

The only thing he needed to worry about was protecting Shi Mei, making sure that things would not happen like they had that year, when Shi Mei had died in Mo Ran's arms...

Shi Mei had no way of knowing Mo Ran was reborn, and chatted with him as he usually did while they went back. Soon, they arrived at the foot of Sisheng Peak.

Who would have thought that, in the dead of the night, there would be a person standing in front of the mountain's gate, glaring at them with a threatening gaze.

"Mo Ran! You finally remembered to come back??"

"Eh?"

Mo Ran looked up. Ah! Such an angry little darling of the heavens. It was none other than a youthful Xue Meng.

Compared to the one he'd seen before his death, this fifteen-ish year old version was much more unruly and handsome. He was dressed in a set of light armour, with a black base and blue trimming, high ponytail tied up with a silver hair piece. A belt decorated with a lion's head was fastened around his strong and slender waist, gaiters wrapping around his wrists and ankles. A slim scimitar on his back gleamed with a cold light, and the quiver by his left arm glittered with silver.

Mo Ran sighed to himself, quietly thinking.

Hmm, flashy.

Xue Meng, whether a teen or a grown up, was really flashy.

Just look at him; rather than sleeping, he dressed himself in full armour. What was he doing? Here to perform a pheasant's mating call? Like a peacock displaying his train?

Mo Ran disliked Xue Meng. Xue Meng too, disliked him back.

Mo Ran was an illegitimate child. When he was little, he hadn't known who his father was. He'd gotten by working odd jobs at a pleasure house^[8] in

XiangTan. It was only when he was fourteen that he was found by relatives, and brought to Sisheng Peak.

Xue Meng, on the other hand, was the young master of Sisheng Peak, as well as Mo Ran's cousin. He was a prodigy, with people calling him the "darling of the heavens" and "son of the phoenix". For a cultivator, on average, the first three years was spent on learning the basics. To form a spiritual core, it took ten. With Xue Meng's innate talent, it had only taken him five years to achieve all of that.

But in Mo Ran's eyes, whether it was a phoenix or chicken, peacock or duck, they were all birds. The only difference was in how long their feathers were.

And so Mo Ran saw Xue Meng as: a bird.
Xue Meng saw Mo Ran as: a dog.

Perhaps it ran in the family, but Mo Ran was shockingly gifted as well, even more so than Xue Meng.

When Mo Ran had first arrived, Xue Meng had considered himself higher class. He was more skillful, more educated, stronger and more handsome. How could he be compared to his illiterate, sloppy, hooligan of a cousin?

Thus this narcissistic phoenix boasted to his attendants, "Listen up, this Mo Ran is a loafer, an absolute street mongrel. You are not allowed to give him any attention. Just pretend he's a dog."

The attendants praised him right back, saying, "Young master is right, that Mo Ran is already fourteen years old. To start cultivation now, he would have to study the basics for ten years, and take another twenty years to form his spiritual core. By then, young master will have already ascended, and he can only watch from below."

Xue Meng sneered. "Twenty? Hmph, looking at this piece of trash, I doubt he could even form a spiritual core."

Who would have thought that this piece of trash would have gained his spiritual core after just one year of studying with his Shizun.

The phoenix felt like he'd been struck by lightning. The harsh truth was hard to swallow.

And so he'd secretly cursed the other to slip and fall when he traveled on his sword, reciting curses until his tongue twisted.

Every time he saw Mo Ran, the small phoenix Xue Meng couldn't help but roll his eyes, and his scoffing could be heard from three miles away.

As Mo Ran remembered these childhood memories, he couldn't help but narrow his eyes in amusement. It had been a very long time since he'd experienced such trivial things. After ten years of loneliness, even unpleasant things from the past had become very sweet to him.

Noticing Xue Meng, Shi Mei dismounted his horse and took his bamboo hat off, revealing a peerlessly stunning face.

It made sense that he would be dressed like this to go out by himself. Mo Ran stole a peek from the side, feeling elation and longing, thinking to himself that this person was truly alluring, a beauty that was out of this world.

Shi Mei greeted Xue Meng, "Young Master."

Xue Meng nodded. "You're back? Did you take care of the man-bear incident?"

Shi Mei smiled. "It's been taken care of, all thanks to A-Ran's help."

Xue Meng's proud and lofty gaze was sharp like a blade. It swept up and down over Mo Ran, then immediately turned away. He furrowed his brows, face twisting in displeasure, as if one more look at Mo Ran would sully his eyes.

"Shi Mei, go back and rest. Stop hanging out with him, he's a petty thief. You'll only learn bad things, hanging out with him."

Mo Ran showed no weakness, and said mockingly, "If Shi Mei isn't going to learn from me, then is he supposed to learn from you? Dressed in full armour in the middle of the night, sticking your tail out like a bird. Prince of the Heavens...? Hahaha! More like Princess of the Heavens!"

Xue Meng was furious. "Mo Ran! Watch your mouth! This is my home! Who do you think you are?!"

Mo Ran contemplated for a moment, counting off on his fingers as he did so, then said, "I'm your older cousin. If you think about it, I'm ranked higher than you, actually."

It was like Xue Meng had been splattered with a faceful of dog shit. He scowled, and said sharply, "Who wants a cousin like you? Don't flatter yourself! In my eyes you're nothing but a dog rolling in the mud!"

Xue Meng was someone who really liked to call other people dogs. Like dog spawn, dog thing, son of a bitch, such epithets came to his mouth with ease. Mo Ran picked his ear nonchalantly; he'd long grown used to these things. But, beside them, Shi Mei was feeling rather awkward. He said some soothing words in a low voice, and with a sneer, Xue Meng finally shut his righteous beak.

Shi Mei smiled, then gently asked, "Young Master, it's so late. Are you waiting for someone?"

"What else would I be doing? Moon-watching?"

Mo Ran burst into laughter. "No wonder you're dressed like this, you're waiting for your date! Ay, who's the unlucky one? I pity her. Hahahahaha."

Xue Meng's expression darkened, and he snapped, "You!"

"...Me?"

"I'm waiting for you, what are you going to do about it?"

Mo Ran: ".....???"

Ch.5 This Venerable One Did Not Steal

Loyalty Hall was brightly lit.

Shi Mei had parted ways with them a while back. Mo Ran stepped into the hall after Xue Meng, perplexed, but suddenly understood the situation upon seeing the scene inside.

Rong Jiu, that sissy.

Mo Ran had stolen some money from him before leaving, and he'd actually had the nerve to come to Sisheng Peak to complain.

Rong Jiu was crying miserably while curled into the arms of a large, stocky man. When Mo Ran and Xue Meng entered the hall, his sobs grew three pitches higher, as if he might foam at the mouth and swoon if not for the arms holding him.

On the dais, behind a bead curtain, a delicate lady sat, clearly at a complete loss.

Mo Ran didn't spare the repulsive pair so much as a glance, and instead saluted to the lady. "Aunt, I'm back."

This woman was indeed the master of Sisheng Peak, Madam Wang.

Unlike those heroines who were every bit a match for their male counterparts, she was a meek homemaker who did not dabble in outside matters. Without her husband here, she really didn't know how to deal with this at all. She spoke timidly, saying, "A-Ran, you've finally returned."

Mo Ran acted as if he didn't even see the pair here to complain, and smiled at her. "Aunt is up so late, did you need me for something?"

"Mn. You see, this Rong gongzi says that you... that you took his money?"

She had a thin face, and was too embarrassed to say that Mo Ran went whoring. Sooo instead, she chose to address the minor offense.

Mo Ran's eyes curved in a smile. "Really? It's not like I'm short on money, why would I need to take theirs? Besides, they don't look familiar, do I know you?"

The stocky man sneered. "Yours truly is surnamed Chang, the eldest of my family. As a business person, minor formalities matter little; you may call me Chang Da [eldest son]."

Mo Ran smiled, and purposefully flipped his name around: "Ah, so it's Da Chang [big intestine] gongzi. It's an honor to finally meet you, please excuse my rudeness. And this other gentleman is..."

Big Intestine gongzi: "Hah, Mo-gongzi sure is fond of acting the fool. This is the first time you and I have met, but in the thirty days of this month, you've spent fifteen nights in Jiu-er's room. Have you gone blind? How would you not recognize him?"

Mo Ran was entirely unperturbed, still smiling as he glanced toward Rong Jiu. "What's this, trying to slander me? I'm a decent, honorable person, of course I've never slept with any San-er or Jiu-er."

Rong Jiu's face was red with anger, but he continued to nestle against Chang's chest, sobbing. "Mo, Mo-gongzi, I know my status is low and unseemly... if you hadn't exploited me so cruelly, I wouldn't have come calling, but to be treated like this, I... I..."

Mo Ran's tone was as if he was the one being wronged. "I really truly do not know you, I can't even tell if you're male or female, how could we have met?"

"You patronized my business just last night, how could you be so cold? Chang-gongzi, Chang-gongzi, you have to get justice on my behalf." He burrowed even deeper into Chang's arms, crying louder than ever.

Off to the side, Xue Meng's entire face was ashen, frown twitching as he listened to this absurdity. If not for the self-restraint of his young master upbringing, he would've beaten this repulsive pair off the mountain long ago.

Big Intestine-gongzi patted Rong Jiu's head while soothing him with soft words, then declared threateningly, "Madam Wang, Sisheng Peak is a virtuous, upright sect, but this Mo-gongzi is vulgar and despicable! Jiu-er works hard for his money, all to buy his own freedom as soon as possible. But this guy! As if mistreating Jiu-er wasn't enough, he even stole all the savings Jiu-er sweat and bled for! The Chang family are not cultivators, but we are moneyed and have been in business for generations. If your sect does not give us a satisfactory explanation today, we will be sure to give the whole lot of you a hard time in BaShu!"

Madam Wang was flustered. "Ah.....Chang-gongzi please calm down, I, I....."

Mo Ran sneered internally. The Chang family were salt merchants, ludicrously loaded. Who would believe that the eldest son of the Chang family couldn't afford to buy out Rong Jiu's freedom, and had to let his Jiu-er earn his way himself? Smelled fishy, to say the least.

But his smile remained fixed as he said, "Ah, so Big Intestine bro is the son of Yizhou's affluent merchant family, impressive and commanding as expected. Truly admirable, admirable!"

Big Intestine-gongzi looked quite smug. "Hmph, so you do know your place. Why don't you make it easy on yourself and 'fess up, where are Jiu-er's things? Hurry and return them."

Mo Ran said, still smiling, "How strange, your Jiu-er takes so many guests every day, even if he lost something, why am I being blamed?"

"You!" Big Intestine-gongzi gritted his teeth, sneering. "Fine fine fine, I just knew you would try to get out of it! Madam Wang, as you've just seen, Mo-gongzi won't be reasonable, and refuses to come clean, I won't waste my breath on him anymore. You're the one in charge, you decide!"

Madam Wang knew little and less of such affairs, and her words stumbled over each other in her nervousness. "I... A-Ran..... Meng-er....."

Unwilling to let his mother get put on the spot like this, Xue Meng stepped forward. "Chang-gongzi, Sisheng Peak has strict rules of discipline. If your accusations turn out to be true, if Mo Ran truly violated the mandates against greed and promiscuity, we will naturally deal out severe punishment. However, it's your word against his, have you any evidence?"

Big Intestine-gongzi smirked. "I knew your sect would pull this, that's why we rushed to get here before Mo Ran arrived, to confront Madam Wang."

He cleared his throat, saying, "All of you listen well. Jiu-er lost two units of pearls, ten gold ingots, a pair of gold plum blossom bracelets, a pair of jade hairpins, and a jade butterfly pendant. Just search Mo Ran for these items, and the truth of my accusations will be made clear."

Mo Ran objected, "What right do you have to body search me?"

"Hmph, looks like a guilty conscience to me." Big Intestine-gongzi lifted his chin haughtily. "Madam Wang, what's the punishment for the sins of thieving and lechery at Sisheng Peak?"

Madam Wang answered softly, "Uhm...my husband has always been the one in charge of sect matters, I truly...do not know..."

"Doubtful, doubtful. I think Madam Wang is purposefully playing dumb to shield her nephew. Heh, who would've thought that Sisheng Peak was actually

such a corrupt, filthy place——”

“That’s quite enough out of you. My aunt already said she’s not used to making these kinds of decisions, aren’t you done bullying a housewife yet?” Mo Ran interrupted, finally fed up with his blathering. Even the carefree grin that was usually on Mo Ran’s face had dropped somewhat. He aimed a sideways glare at the repulsive couple.

“Fine, search me then. But if nothing is found, yet you slandered my sect to such extent, what should be done then?”

“Then I will promptly apologize to Mo-gongzi.”

“Sure.” Mo Ran agreed easily enough. “But just one thing. If you’re wrong, then you have to crawl off Sisheng Peak on your hands and knees as an apology.”

Seeing Mo Ran’s confidence, a seed of doubt couldn’t help but sprout within Big Intestine-gongzi’s heart.

He had held cultivators in high regard since he was young, but he himself unfortunately had no talent for cultivation.

A couple days ago, he’d heard that his old paramour Rong Jiu had somehow earned Mo Ran’s favor, so the two had come to an agreement. Rong Jiu would find an opening to seize Mo Ran’s cultivation, and Big Intestine-gongzi would buy his freedom in exchange. Not only that, he’d also promised to take Rong Jiu into his household, and take care of him for life.

Big Intestine-gongzi longed for cultivation, Rong Jiu coveted riches. The pair of scoundrels were well-matched in their collusion.

Mo Ran had fallen for their scheme in the previous lifetime. He’d gotten even in the end, but had suffered quite a bit in doing so. This time around, their ploy came up completely empty, for Mo Ran had done an about-face suddenly and for no apparent reason. He’d still been in a drunken stupor mere days ago, nestled tenderly in Rong Jiu’s arms, Jiu-er this, Jiu-er that. But this morning, he’d brutally screwed Rong Jiu twice, unexpectedly taken all his belongings and valuables, and run off.

Big Intestine-gongzi was furious, and had immediately dragged Rong Jiu to Sisheng Peak to complain.

This salt merchant gongzi was a shrewd businessman; he figured that if he just busted Mo Ran, then he could force Madam Wang to disperse his cultivation. He’d come prepared with a cultivation-absorbing jade pendant, to gather some easy pickings for assimilation into his own spiritual reservoir later.

But looking at Mo Ran now, Big Intestine-gongzi hesitated.

Mo Ran was a crafty guy. What if he’d already sold the stolen goods, and was just waiting to pull one over on him?

But then again, things had already come to this point, it’d be a waste to give up now. Maybe he was just bluffing.....

The one over here was still struggling with his thoughts, but Mo Ran had already started stripping over there.

He took off his outer robe, casually tossed it aside, and gestured in invitation with a smile. “Go ahead and take your time to search.”

After all that racket, they found nothing but some spare change. Big Intestine-gongzi’s expression changed entirely.

"Impossible!! You're definitely playing some trick!"

Mo Ran squinted his purple-tinted eyes, stroking his chin. "You've already turned my robe inside out ten times, and touched me all over seven, eight times. There's nothing left to do short of getting totally naked, and you're still not giving up?"

"Mo Ran, you——"

Mo Ran had a sudden realization. "Ah, I get it! Big Intestine-gongzi, could it be that you've been lustng after my good looks, and put on this entire show just to take advantage of me and cop a feel?"

Big Intestine-gongzi was about to pass out from rage; his entire face was red with anger, and he pointed at Mo Ran, but was unable to manage a single word. Watching from the side, Xue Meng had long hit the limits of his patience; he might have disapproved of Mo Ran, but Mo Ran was still a member of Sisheng Peak, and outsiders had no right to degrade him.

Xue Meng strode forward with not a trace of politeness, raised his hand and unhesitatingly broke Big Intestine-gongzi's finger, admonishing, "We've humored you for half the night, but it turns out you were just making trouble out of nothing!"

Big Intestine-gongzi howled in pain, cradling his finger. "T-the lot of you! You're all in on it together! No wonder the things weren't on Mo Ran, you must've hidden them! You strip too, let me search!"

Someone actually dared to order *him* to strip?! Xue Meng immediately flew into a humiliation-driven rage. "Shameless! You really think those dog paws of yours are fit to touch even the corner of my hem? Get the hell out!"

Now that the young master had spoken, the attendants in Loyalty Hall, also long since fed up with this facade, immediately surged forth to clear out this pair of ordinary people with no means of resistance, and soundly kicked them off the mountain.

Big Intestine-gongzi's furious screeching could be heard from the distance. "Mo Ran, just you wait! I'm not done with you yet!"

Standing outside Loyalty Hall, Mo Ran gazed at the night sky, his eyes curved into a smile, and sighed. "I'm so scared~"

Xue Meng shot him a cold glare. "What're you afraid of?"

Mo Ran said with genuine worry, "They're salt sellers, I'm afraid I won't get to have any more salt in the future~"

"....."

Xue Meng was silent for a moment, before asking, "You really didn't screw the prostitute?"

"Nope."

"And you really didn't steal?"

"I really did not."

Xue Meng hmpf'd. "I don't believe you."

Mo Ran raised a hand, laughing. "Let the heavens strike me down with lightning if I'm lying."

Xue Meng suddenly lifted his hand, and grabbed Mo Ran's arm in a vice grip. Mo Ran stared at him. "What are you doing?" Xue Meng humph'd again, and rapidly chanted an incantation. Scattered sounds could be heard as a handful of beads, each about the size of a soybean, slipped out of Mo Ran's sleeve and fell to the ground.

Xue Meng gathered spiritual energy in his hand and waved toward the beads. The beads started glowing and growing in size, turning into a pile of jewels and valuables, plum blossom bracelets, and jade earrings, golden and sparkling on the ground.

Mo Ran: "...We're fellow disciples of the same sect, don't make things difficult."

Xue Meng glowered. "Mo Weiyu, have you no shame."

"Hehe."

Xue Meng roared, "No one's laughing with you!"

Mo Ran sighed. "It's not like I can cry on command."

Xue Meng's face was gloomy. "Is this how you use Sisheng Peak's concealing technique?"

"Mhm, practical applications~"

Xue Meng's anger returned. "That salt merchant was an annoying dog-thing, so I didn't roast you in front of him. But that dog-thing did have one thing right: violating the mandates against thieving and lechery like you have, no matter which sect you're at, you'd have it coming!"

Mo Ran grinned, undaunted. "And what are you gonna do about it? Wait for uncle to come back to tattle on me?"

He wasn't even worried. His uncle spoiled him to no end; the most he would do would be to scold Mo Ran a little, he'd never have the heart to beat him.

Xue Meng turned around, brushing his wind-blown hair aside, his eyes glinting with scorn in the darkness of night.

"Dad? No, he's at Kunlun and won't be back for a month or two."

Mo Ran's smile froze, an ominous feeling washing over him. He suddenly remembered a certain person.

But—

If he were here, then it would've been him receiving Chang-gongzi at Loyalty Hall today, not the oblivious Madam Wang.

That person... shouldn't be here... right...?

Seeing the flickers in his eyes, Xue Meng's air of disdain became even more obvious.

"Dad does spoil you overmuch, but here at Sisheng Peak, isn't there someone who doesn't coddle you?"

Mo Ran slowly backed away a few steps, a forced smile on his face. "My esteemed cousin, it's so late already, let's not disturb the elder's peace and quiet, I was wrong, there won't be a next time, how about that? Please go get some rest, hehe, you look so tired."

And then he immediately made a run for it.

You've got to be kidding me! This Xue Meng fellow is way too ruthless!

Right now he isn't Taxian-Jun, ruler of the human world, how could he risk falling into that person's hands? If that person were to find out that he had stolen and whored, he'd probably break both of Mo Ran's legs! If he doesn't run now, he won't get a chance to anymore!

Ch.6 This Venerable One's Shizun

Xue Meng had grown up on Sisheng Peak, and knew all of its ins and outs and shortcuts, and so in the end he still managed to capture Mo Ran.

After arresting him, he dragged him to the back of the mountain. The entire back mountain of Sisheng Peak was the closest place the mortal realm was to the ghost realm. Between the two realms lay a barrier, and beyond that barrier was the underworld.

Taking a look at the appalling state of the barrier, Mo Ran immediately knew why even though that person was home, it was still Madam Wang who had appeared in the main hall to greet and receive the audience.

It wasn't that that person didn't want to help, it was that he really couldn't step away——

The barrier of the ghost realm had ruptured.

At this very moment, the entire back of the mountain was permeated with the essence of evil. Spirits that had yet to form a solid body swirled in the air, wailing in despair, their howling full of rancor. At the entrance to the mountain gates a giant breach could be seen, ripped open in the sky. Behind the breach lay the ghost realm, with a long, bluestone staircase, thousands of steps high, extending from the fissure of the barrier. Menacing ghosts that had already cultivated a flesh-form crawled down in great numbers, creeping from the ghost realm to the mortal realm.

If it were a normal person seeing this sight, they would no doubt freak out, terrified. Mo Ran had been soaked with the cold sweat of fear, the first time he'd seen something like this, but he'd long since gotten used to it.

The barrier between the mortal and the ghost realms had been first built by Emperor Fuxi in ancient times. It had become thin and weakened through the passage of time, often cracking and breaking in various places, needing the repair of cultivated immortals. However, a task like this not only did not elevate one's cultivation by much, but it was also incredibly taxing on one's spiritual power. To work so hard for nothing was an arduous chore, and so not many cultivators in the cultivation world were willing to pick up the burden.

When menacing spirits entered the world, the ones they attacked first were the common people of the lower cultivation world. As the protectors of the lower cultivation world, Sisheng Peak thus took on the job of repairing barriers. The mountains at the back of their sect faced the weakest point of the barrier, all for the sake of being able to do such repairs in time.

This ragged barrier would fail at least four or five times a year, just like a leaky, second hand pot: useless.

A man stood at the entrance to the ghost realm, atop the bluestone staircase. His snow white robes fluttered, his expansive sleeves flew in the wind, and the aura of his blade enveloped him, its golden light shimmering. By his

powers alone, he was sweeping up those menacing spirits, cleaning those evil ghosts away, repairing the breach in the barrier.

That man was slender in form and elegant in appearance, with an aura of transcendent holiness and a face that was exceedingly handsome and beautiful. From afar, it would be easy to imagine him as a scholar of dignity, standing beneath a blossoming tree, studying a scroll with an otherworldly, studious air. But up close, his expression was as sharp as a blade; his phoenix eyes slanted upwards, his nose was straight and narrow. He had the very appearance of sophistication and refined manners, but there was something acerbic to his gaze, giving him a particularly cold and cruel look.

Mo Ran watched him from a distance. Although he'd thought himself prepared, if he were to be honest, to see that person appear once more before him, healthy and well, made him tremble down to the smallest fragments of his bones.

Half dread, half...thrill.

His Shizun.
Chu Wanning.

The person that Xue Meng had cried and begged to see when he'd come to Wushan Palace in the previous life.

It had been this man who'd ruined Mo Ran's grand plans. He'd ruined Mo Ran's ambitious ideals and had, in the end, been imprisoned and tortured to death by Mo Ran.

Technically, Mo Ran should have been glad, to defeat an opponent and get the chance to avenge himself.

The ocean was free for fish to swim, the sky open for birds to fly, and no longer could anyone stop him. Originally, Mo Ran had thought he would think this way.

However, things did not turn out that way.

After Shizun's death, something else seemed to have been buried, together with Mo Ran's hatred.

Mo Ran wasn't a man of culture, and did not recognise that something else as the feeling of being evenly matched with a worthy opponent.

He only knew that, from then, he had no more arch enemies in this world.

When Shizun had been alive, Mo Ran had been scared, afraid, anxious. The moment he saw the willow vine in Shizun's hands, his entire body would break out in goosebumps, just like how the mere sound of a wooden club's knocking would make an oft-beaten dog shrink back, teeth aching and legs giving way, drool leaking from the corner of its lips. Even the muscles of his calves would spasm from nervousness.

With Shizun's death, the person Mo Ran feared the most had passed away. Mo Ran felt like he'd grown up, matured, that he was finally able to commit this sin of murdering his mentor.

After that, when his eyes swept through the mortal world, there was no longer anyone who dared force him to kneel, no longer anyone who dared slap him in the face.

To celebrate, he opened a pot of pear blossom white wine, and sat on the rooftops drinking for an entire night.

That night, under the influence of alcohol, the scars on his back from being whipped by Shizun in his youth felt like they were brand new, burning once more with fresh pain.

At this very moment, seeing with his own eyes his Shizun standing once more before him, Mo Ran couldn't help but stare, feeling both fear and resentment but also the faintest trace of a twisted sort of ecstasy.

To have regained such an opponent after having lost him, how could he not be delighted?

Chu Wanning was completely focused on fighting the scattered souls of the dead, ignoring the two disciples who had intruded the back of the mountains.

He had an elegant face; his brows were long and even, and his phoenix eyes were cast downwards, his demeanour graceful, dignified, and otherworldly. His expression was unchanged, cool and distant even in the face of demonic air and bloody rain; it would not have looked strange or out of place if he were to sit down on the spot to light incense and play the guqin.

However, this graceful and somber man was currently wielding a chilling long exorcist sword that dripped with blood. With a single flick of his expansive sleeve, the force of his blade sliced through the verdant stone steps with an explosion. Rubble and debris tumbled down, and a rift of indiscernible depth split into that staircase with its thousands of steps, from from the mountain gates at the top all the way down to the bottom of the mountain.

Such brutal ferocity.

How many years had it been since he'd last witnessed Shizun's strength?

That familiar valiant, overbearing force made Mo Ran's legs weak out of habit. Unsteady, he dropped to his knees onto the ground.

It didn't take Chu Wanning too much time to annihilate all the ghosts and neatly fill the leaking hole to the ghost realm. After completing his task, he descended from the sky lightly and languidly, landing before Mo Ran and Xue Meng.

He first glanced at Mo Ran, kneeling on the ground, before looking up to Xue Meng, his phoenix eyes somewhat icy.

"Caused trouble again?"

Mo Ran had to concede.

Shizun possessed an ability, one that let him assess a situation and come immediately to the most accurate judgment.

"Shizun, Mo Ran went down the mountain and committed the crimes of thievery and debauchery. Shizun, please deal out his punishment," Xue Meng said.

Chu Wanning was silent for a moment, expression completely blank, and then he said coldly, "I see."

Mo Ran: "....."

Xue Meng: "....."

Both of them were a little taken aback. And then? Was that it?

Yet just as Mo Ran was starting to think he'd gotten off lucky, he stole a glimpse at Chu Wanning, and was caught entirely off his guard as he saw a flash of sharp golden light, slashing through the air violently. A lightning-like crackle whipped directly onto Mo Ran's cheek!!!

Splatters of blood blossomed everywhere!

The speed of that golden light was too shocking. Nevermind dodging, Mo Ran didn't even have the time to close his eyes before the flesh of his face was slashed open, the wound burning painfully.

Chu Wanning stood coldly in the deadly breeze of the deep night with his hands clasped behind his back. The air was still filthy and thick with the stench of menacing spirits; with the addition of the smell of freshly spilt human blood, it made the forbidden grounds of the back mountain even more eerie and horrifying.

The thing that had whipped Mo Ran was a willow vine, which had appeared from out of nowhere into Chu Wanning's hand. The vine hung all the way down to Chu Wanning's boots, and was long and thin, with tender green leaves sprouting along it.

The vine was undoubtedly an elegant object, one that would have called to mind verses of poetry, like "Pliant is the willow branch I gift to my beloved"^[9].

Unfortunately, Chu Wanning was neither pliant, nor in possession of a beloved.

The willow vine in his hand was actually a holy weapon called "Tianwen". At this very moment, Tianwen was sparking with bright gold and crimson light, illuminating the darkness all around, as well as the bottomless depths of Chu Wanning's eyes, bringing them to life.

Chu Wanning's lips pressed thin as he said, voice chilly, "Mo Weiyu, you sure are brazen. Did you really think I wouldn't discipline you?"

If this was really the sixteen year old Mo Ran, he might not have taken Chu Wanning's words seriously, thinking that Shizun was only bluffing to scare him.

However, the Mo Weiyu who had been reborn had long since in his previous life paid the blood price to learn just what his Shizun's discipline was like. Immediately, he could feel the roots of his teeth aching and blood rushing to his head. His mouth was already running, aggressively denying everything, hoping to clear his name.

"Shizun..." Cheek still bleeding, Mo Ran raised his eyes, letting them fill with a sheen of tears. He knew that his current disposition was exceedingly pathetic and pitiful. "This disciple has never stolen...has never committed debauchery... how come Shizun hits me purely on the basis of Xue Meng's word, without even having asked my side of the story?"

"....."

Against his uncle, Mo Ran had two ultimate tricks. Number one: act cute. Number two: act pitiful. He now turned both moves onto Chu Wanning, looking so aggrieved that tears threatened to spill. "Is this disciple really so worthless in your eyes? How come Shizun won't even give me a chance to explain?"

Next to them, Xue Meng was so incensed that he stomped his foot. "Mo Ran!!! You, you piece of dog's leg! You, you're shameless! Shizun, don't listen to him! Don't let this bastard confuse you! He really did steal! All the stolen property is still here!"

Chu Wanning lowered his eyes, his expression cool and distant. "Mo Ran, have you really never committed theft?"

"Never."

"...You should know what the consequences of lying to me are."

Mo Ran's entire body broke out in gooseflesh. How could he not know? Still, he remained stubborn as a mule. "Shizun, please investigate!"

Chu Wanning raised his hand. That shimmering vine came sweeping again, this time not to whip Mo Ran's face. Instead, it bound itself tightly around Mo Ran.

This sensation was way too familiar. Other than whipping people on the daily, the willow vine 'Tianwen' had another use——

Chu Wanning stared at Mo Ran, who was held in Tianwen's death grip, and asked once more, "Have you never committed theft?"

Suddenly, all Mo Ran could feel was a familiar agony piercing straight into his heart, as if a sharp fanged little snake had suddenly slithered its way into his chest and was causing havoc amidst his organs.

Accompanying the stabbing pain was an irresistible temptation. Mo Ran's mouth opened in spite of himself and he said hoarsely, "I...have...never... AH...!!"

Tianwen's golden light went berserk, as if it could sense he was lying. But though the pain was enough to drench Mo Ran in cold sweat, he still resisted this torture with all he had.

After whipping, this was Tianwen's second function——interrogation.

Once bound by Tianwen, none could lie before it. No matter whether they were human or ghost, alive or dead, Tianwen had the ability to force them to speak, giving Chu Wanning the answers he demanded.

There was only one person in the previous life who had, relying on his strong cultivation, finally managed to achieve the feat of keeping a secret from Tianwen.

And that person was the one who had become the emperor of the mortal world, Mo Weiyu.

The freshly reborn Mo Ran had high hopes, and thought that he should still be able to fight against Tianwen's forceful interrogation like he'd once been able to. But after what felt like an eternity of biting down on his lips, giant beads of sweat dripping down his inky dark brows, and full-body shivers wracking through him, in the end, he was left prostrate from pain, kneeling at Chu Wanning's feet, gasping out heaving breaths.

"I... I... did steal..."

The pain disappeared abruptly.

Mo Ran hadn't even caught his breath before Chu Wanning's next question came, his voice sounding colder than before.

"Did you commit debauchery?"

Clever men don't do stupid deeds. Since he hadn't been able to hold on earlier, then it was even more impossible now. This time, Mo Ran didn't even bother to object; the moment the pain came he cried, "I have I have I have I have!!! Shizun please! No more"

At the side, Xue Meng's face was just about turning blue, and he said, shocked, "How, how could you...that Rong Jiu is a man, and yet you....."

He went ignored as Tianwen's golden light slowly dimmed. Mo Ran sucked in large mouthfuls of air, his entire body drenched like he'd just been fished up

from water. His face was white as a sheet, and his lips trembled uncontrollably as he lay on the ground, unable to move.

Through his sweat drenched lashes, he could see Chu Wanning's blurry yet elegant silhouette, with its green jade crown and expansive sleeves that draped to the ground.

A wave of powerful hatred suddenly coursed through his heart—— Chu Wanning! This Venerable One hadn't been wrong in treating you the way he had in the previous life!! Even coming back to life, the very sight of you is enough to annoy me! Fuck all eighteen generations of your ancestors!!

Chu Wanning was not aware that his beast of a disciple was going to fuck all eighteen generations of his ancestors. He stood where he was for the moment, face gloomy. Then, he said, "Xue Meng."

Even though Xue Meng knew that currently it was trendy for wealthy houses to find pleasure in the male form, that many enjoyed playing with boy prostitutes because it was refreshing, that it didn't mean they actually liked men, he still found that fact rather difficult to swallow. It took him a moment to reply. "Shizun, this disciple is present."

"Mo Ran has transgressed the three mandates against greedy thievery, debauchery, and deception. Take him to Yanluo Hall for penance. Bring him to the Platform of Sin and Virtue first thing tomorrow morning to be punished before all."

Xue Meng was shocked. "W-what? To be punished before all?"

To be punished before all meant that the disciple that had committed grave sins would be dragged before all the disciples of the sect to be sentenced and punished in front of everyone. Even the grannies in the cafeteria would be brought over.

Completely disgraceful.

It should be known that Mo Ran was a young master of Sisheng Peak! Although the rules of the sect could be said to be strict, because Mo Ran's status was special — his uncle felt sorry that he'd lost his parents since young and that he had been stranded outside for a whole fourteen years — he would always defend Mo Ran out of indulgence. Even if Mo Ran made mistakes, he would still only lecture privately, and had never once beaten him.

But Shizun would not save even the sect leader's face, and would actually drag his precious nephew to the Platform of Sin and Virtue, would punish and shame Mo-Gongzi before the entire sect. This was something Xue Meng had never expected.

Mo Ran, on the other hand, wasn't surprised at all.
He lay on the ground, his lips curling into a sneer.

Look how righteous his Shizun was, so full of justice.

Chu Wanning was a cold-blooded person. In the previous life, Shi Mei had died before his very eyes. Mo Ran had cried and pleaded, tugged at the hem of his robes, knelt on the ground, begged for his help.

But Chu Wanning had turned a deaf ear.

And so his disciple had breathed his last breath before him. And next to him, Mo Ran had cried his heart out. And still, Chu Wanning had watched on without lifting a finger.

Right now it was nothing more than being dragged to the Platform of Sin and Virtue to be sentenced in public. There was nothing out of the ordinary

about this.

Mo Ran could only resent his current self's weak cultivation. He resented that he couldn't peel off Chu Wanning's skin, pull out his nerves, drink his blood. Resented that he couldn't yank Chu Wanning's hair back, couldn't violate and corrupt him to his heart's content, couldn't torment him, destroy his dignity, make him live a life worse than death...

The beast-like savagery in his eyes let slip for a moment, and Chu Wanning caught a glimpse of it.

He glanced lightly across Mo Ran's face, his own graceful, scholarly face completely devoid of expression.

"What are you thinking about?"

Shit!

Tianwen hadn't been withdrawn yet!

Mo Ran could once again feel the vine that bound him squeeze and twist, his organs feeling like they were going to wrench into mush. He screamed in agony, letting loose the thoughts in his mind——

"CHU WANNING! THINK YOU'RE SO TOUGH?! WATCH ME FUCK YOU TO DEATH!"

All was silent.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Even Xue Meng was dumbfounded, "....."

Tianwen suddenly returned to Chu Wanning's palm, transforming into specks of golden light before eventually disappearing out of sight. Tianwen was made from Chu Wanning's bones and blood, and could appear when summoned and disappeared at will.

Xue Meng's face was pale as he stammered, "Sh-Sh-Shizun....."

Chu Wanning didn't speak. His long, inky, delicate lashes were lowered as he looked at his own palm for a long moment. Then he raised his eyes, face unmoved other than his expression being slightly icier than before. He pinned Mo Ran with a glare that said "this beastly disciple deserves death" for a long moment before speaking, voice low as he said:

"Tianwen is broken. I'm going to fix it."

After throwing out such words, Chu Wanning turned around and left.

Xue Meng wasn't a bright child, "H-How can a holy weapon like Tianwen be broken?"

Chu Wanning heard him. He turned and once again used that "this beastly disciple deserves death" gaze to glance back at him. Xue Meng felt a chill run down his spine.

Mo Ran lay on the ground, half dead, his expression lifeless.

Earlier he really had been thinking about finding a chance to fuck Chu Wanning to death. He was well aware that this Chu-zongshi, with his titles like "Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal"^[10] was someone who always paid attention to refined, elegant manners and dignity. What he really couldn't bear was to be quashed beneath someone's foot, to be sullied and oppressed.

But how could he let Chu Wanning find something like this out!

Mo Ran howled pathetically like an abandoned dog, covering his face.

Recalling Chu Wanning's eyes as he'd left, Mo Ran felt that he probably didn't have long to live.

Author's Notes:

Shizun is finally here! Do not board the wrong ship, do not assume the wrong position. Shizun is bottom, bottom, bottom = =. Ink Feed Fish (a pun on Mo Weiyu) is the top, the MC is the top!

Meatbun: Why did your legs go weak when you saw Shizun? Aren't you the top? Where is your top energy?

Ink Feed Fish: Old age, arthritis.

Meatbun: Speak properly.

Ink Feed Fish: Can you stop emphasizing my 32 year old soul in the story! After reincarnation I became supple! I'm an innocent and energetic youth!

Meatbun: Then how do you still have arthritis?????

Ch.7 This Venerable One Likes Wontons

The sun blazed down from above.

Sisheng Peak's veranda stretched out for a hundred miles.

As a newcomer among the cultivation sects, it was different from the other famed sects of the upper cultivation realm.

Take, for example, Rufeng Sect of Linyi. Their main hall was named "Six Virtues Hall", to encourage the disciples to be "wise, faithful, holy, righteous, benevolent, and loyal". The disciples resided in an area called "Six Demeanor Gate", reminding the disciples to be "filial, cordial, harmonious, martial, responsible, and compassionate" toward one another. And the area of study was named "Six Arts Platform", meaning that disciples were expected to be masters in "ritual, music, archery, riding, calligraphy, and arithmetics".

In other words, endless elegance.

On the other hand, Sisheng Peak came from an impoverished background, and its names were...hard to explain, to say the least. "Loyalty Hall" and "Platform of Sin and Virtue" were still acceptable. Perhaps it was because Mo Ran's father and uncle weren't exactly scholars and couldn't choke out that many decent names, but towards the end, they started to get nonsensical, assigning "Xue Ya"-esque names left and right.

Thus, Sisheng Peak had many names plagiarized from the underworld. For example, the self-reflection room was called Yanluo Hall[\[11\]](#).

The bridge connecting the recess and study areas was called Naihe Bridge[\[12\]](#). The dining hall was called Mengpo Hall[\[13\]](#). The training field was called Mountain of Daggers and Sea of Flames. The forbidden area behind the mountain was called Ghost Zone. So on and so forth.

At least these were relatively acceptable. The more out of the way areas were bluntly named "This is Mountain", "This Is Water", "This Is A Hole", as well as the famed "Aaaaah" and "Waaaah" cliffs.

The quarters of the elders naturally did not escape unscathed, and each had their own nicknames.

And naturally, Chu Wanning was no exception. He liked peace and quiet and did not want to live near others. His residence was located at the southern summit of Sisheng Peak, hidden in a bamboo grove like an ocean of jade. There was a pond before the main hall, covered in blooming red lotuses throughout the seasons thanks to a bounty of spiritual energy, resplendent as crimson clouds.

The disciples secretly called this elegant and scenic place——
Red Lotus Hell.

Thinking about it, Mo Ran couldn't help but snicker.

Chu Wanning wore a frightful and sour face day in day out. To the disciples, seeing him was like seeing the devil himself, and what should the home of the devil be called if not hell?

Xue Meng interrupted his daydream. "The hell are you giggling about! Hurry and finish your breakfast, I have to take you to the Platform of Sin and Virtue after this. Did you forget that Shizun is going to discipline you in public today!"

Mo Ran sighed, and gingerly touched the lash mark on his face.
"Hss.....ow."

"Serves you right!"

"Sigh, I wonder if Tianwen has been fixed yet. Please don't interrogate me with it again if not, who knows what other nonsense I might spout."

Faced with Mo Ran's genuine worries, Xue Meng's face flushed with anger. He threatened, "If you dare to be im-improper toward Shizun in public, I'll rip your tongue out!"

Mo Ran covered his face with one hand and waved the other as he croaked faintly, "No need, no need, if Shizun ties me up with that willow vine again, I will just end myself on the spot to prove my innocence."

Early in the morning, Mo Ran was brought onto the Platform of Sin and Virtue in accordance with customs. He cast his gaze out; below, a sea of people stood, dressed in dark blue as far as the eye could see. The disciples of Sisheng Peak were all dressed in the sect uniform: light armor so blue as to be nearly black, lion head belt, wrist guard and clothing trimmed in sparkling silver.

The sun rose from the east; below the Platform of Sin and Virtue, a sea of gleaming armor.

Mo Ran knelt on the high platform, listening to the Jielu Elder read the lengthy indictment.

"Mo Weiyu, disciple of Yuheng Elder, disregarded commandments and ignored teachings, disrespected sect rules and abandoned morality. You have violated the fourth, ninth, and fifteenth mandates. As punishment, you will receive eighty strikes, copy the sect rules one hundred times, and reflect in confinement for one month. Mo Weiyu, have you anything to say in your defense?"

Mo Ran glanced at the white silhouette in the distance.

That elder was the only person in the entirety of Sisheng Peak who was not required to wear the standard silver-trimmed blue uniform.

Chu Wanning dressed in snow-white satin, with an outer drape of cloud-patterned silver silk, as if swathed in clear frost from the highest of the heavens, but the person himself seemed more frigid than even snow and frost. He sat calmly, too far away for Mo Ran to see his expression, but Mo Ran knew, without needing to see, that this person was probably entirely unperturbed.

Inhaling deeply, Mo Ran replied, "I have nothing to say in my defense."

Next, in accordance with custom, Jielu Elder asked the disciples gathered below, "If anyone disagrees with the judgement, or has any other appeals, you may now speak."

The disciples fidgeted, glancing at one another.

No one had thought that Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning would actually send his own disciple to the Platform of Sin and Virtue to be punished in public.

This... to put it politely, was strict and impartial; but to put it frankly, was called being a cold-blooded demon.

Cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning wore an air of indifference, sitting in his seat with his chin propped up. Suddenly, someone shouted, using an amplification technique, "Yuheng Elder, this disciple would like to plead for leniency on behalf of Mo-shidi."

".....Is that so?"

Mo Ran was the Peak Lord's nephew; the disciple clearly thought that, even if he blundered, his prospects were still bright and promising, and so he decided to seize the opportunity to win favor with Mo Ran. He started to babble nonsense. "Although Mo-shidi had erred, he is cordial with his fellow disciples and compassionate to the small and weak in his daily conduct, will Elder please grant leniency in view of his kind nature!"

He was not the only one hoping to curry favor with Mo-shidi.

More and more people began to speak on Mo Ran's behalf, on grounds fantastic and varied. Even Mo Ran himself was embarrassed listening to them —when had he ever been "pure and innocent, broad-minded and open"? Was this assembly for punishment or commendation?

"Yuheng Elder, Mo-shidi once helped me defeat demons and slay vicious beasts. I would like to request recognition for Mo-shidi's merits, merits undoing demerits, requesting Elder to lessen the punishment!"

"Yuheng Elder, when I experienced qi deviation, it was Mo-shidi who helped me dispel my inner demons; I believe Mo-shidi only erred due to a brief lapse in judgement, requesting Elder to lighten shidi's punishment!"

"Yuheng Elder, Mo-Shidi once bestowed me an elixir to save my mother, he is virtuous and benevolent by nature, Elder, please be lenient!"

The final person's pretext had been taken by the person before him, and he was left at a loss for words. Chu Wanning's frosty gaze swept toward him, and he rambled out in a panic: "Yuheng Elder, Mo-shidi once helped me dual cultivate——"

"Pfft." Someone failed to hold in their laughter.

That disciple blushed up to his ears, and withdrew in embarrassment.

"Yuheng, calm down, calm down....." Jielu Elder, seeing this turn of events, hurriedly tried to soothe him.

Chu Wanning spoke coldly, “I have never seen a person this shameless. What is his name? Whose disciple?”

Jielu hesitated slightly, then forced himself to quietly respond: “My disciple, Yao Lian.”

Chu Wanning raised his eyebrows: “Your disciple? Save face?[\[14\]](#)”

This was acutely awkward for Jielu Elder, whose old face was bright red as he tried to change the topic. “His singing voice is not bad, useful to keep around when receiving offerings.”

Chu Wanning hmph’d and turned away, not wanting to waste any more breath with this shameless Jielu Elder.

There were thousands of people in Sisheng Peak. A couple of sycophants here and there was nothing out of the ordinary.

Looking at the persistent conviction of his sect brothers, even Mo Ran himself almost began to believe them. Impressive, impressive. As it turns out, he wasn’t the only one in this sect adept at spewing lies in broad daylight—this place was full of talented people.

After countless pleas of “Yuheng Elder please be merciful”, Chu Wanning finally spoke.

“Pleading on behalf of Mo Weiyu?” He paused before continuing. “Very well. Come up.”

Unsure what to expect, those people went up with fear and trepidation.

A golden light flashed in Chu Wanning’s hand, and Tianwen appeared as commanded, wrapping the people, more than a dozen of them, into a bundle with a *woosh*, binding them firmly in place.

Not this again!!

Mo Ran was about to lose all hope. The mere sight of Tianwen made his legs go soft; where the hell had Chu Wanning even attained such a deviant weapon from; it was a good thing he’d never taken a wife in the previous lifetime. Pity the woman who’d get stuck with him, if she didn’t get whipped to death, she’d probably be interrogated to death.

Chu Wanning’s gaze was full of scorn, he asked one from the group, “Mo Ran helped you defeat demons?”

The disciple had no chance against Tianwen’s torment, and howled immediately, “No! NO!”

Asking another one: “Mo Ran helped you break out of a qi deviation?”

“AAAH!! Never! Never!”

“Mo Ran gifted you an elixir?”

“AA——! Help!! Nonono! I made it up! I made it up!”

Chu Wanning loosened the bind, but immediately after, he raised his hand in a ruthless brandish. Sparks flew everywhere as Tianwen soared out to land brutally against the backs of those lying disciples.

Shrieks were heard instantly, blood splashing.

Chu Wanning frowned, berating, "What are you yelling for? Kneel! Discipline attendant!"

"Present."

"Deliver the punishment!"

"Understood!"

In the end, not only did these people not manage to gain any favor, they each earned ten strikes for violating the mandate against deception, plus a free bonus lash from Yuheng Elder.

Come nightfall found Mo Ran sprawled out on his bed. Even though medicinal ointment has been applied, his back was still covered in criss-crossing wounds, and it was impossible to even turn over. He let out a few snuffles, eyes watering from the pain.

With his cute looks, this kind of whimpering made him seem like a fluffy, abused kitten. Unfortunately his inner thoughts were nothing like those of a kitten.

He gripped the blanket and bit into the bed sheets, imagining that bastard Chu Wanning in their place. He bit! Stomped! Kicked! Ripped!

His only comfort was that Shi Mei came to visit him with a bowl of handmade wontons. Under Shi Mei's gentle, compassionate gaze, Mo Ran's tears poured even more fiercely.

He didn't care for concepts like "men do not cry". He loved to act spoiled in front of the person he liked.

"Does it hurt a lot? Are you able to sit up?" Shi Mei sat at the edge of his bed, sighing. "Shizun he..... his hand was really too heavy. Look at your wounds..... some of them are still bleeding."

Warmth rose in Mo Ran's chest, listening to these sympathetic words. He looked up with teary eyes, and batted his eyelashes.

"Since Shi Mei cares for me so much, I, I don't feel any pain anymore."

"Oh, look at your condition, how can it not hurt? It's not like you don't know Shizun's temperament; do you still dare blunder so in the future?"

Shi Mei looked at him with equal parts helplessness and sympathy, his expressive eyes gleaming in the candlelight like a warm spring.

Mo Ran's heart skipped a beat, he answered obediently, "Won't happen again. I swear."

"Who even takes your swears seriously anymore?" Shi Mei scolded, but he was smiling. "The wontons are getting cold, can you get up? Just stay put if not, I'll feed you."

Mo Ran was already halfway up, but at these words, he collapsed back down immediately.

Shi Mei: "....."

In both this lifetime and the last, Shi Mei's wontons were Mo Ran's favorite. With wrappers thin like clouds and fillings delicate as cream, every bite was

moist and satisfying, soft and savory, melting in your mouth and leaving behind a delectable aftertaste.

Especially the soup, simmered to a rich milky consistency, sprinkled with bits of chopped green scallion and tender wisps of yellow eggs, and finally a spoonful of chili oil pepper stir-fried in garlic paste, warming you from the inside out when eaten.

Shi Mei fed him attentively, spoonful by spoonful, saying, “I didn’t add any chili oil today, your injuries are too severe, and spicy food is not good for recovery. Settle for the broth, ok?”

Mo Ran stared at him, smiling, unable and unwilling to look away. “Everything you make is delicious, spicy or not.”

“Flatterer.” Shi Mei smiled back, and picked out the poached egg in the soup. “Here’s a runny egg as a reward, I know you like those.”

Mo Ran laughed mischievously, a silly tuft of hair curling up from his head^[15], like a flower blooming. “Shi Mei.”

“Yes?”

“Nothing, just felt like calling your name.”

“.....”

The hair tuft swayed back and forth.
“Shi Mei.”

Shi Mei suppressed a laugh. “Just calling again?”

“Mhm, just calling your name makes me happy.”

Shi Mei hesitated for a moment, then gently felt his forehead. “Silly child, do you have a fever?”

Mo Ran chuckled, and rolled over halfway to peek at him sideways, eyes brightly shining, like they were full of stars.

“I wish I could eat Shi Mei’s wontons every day.”

He meant every word.

After Shi Mei’s death, Mo Ran had always longed to taste his handmade wontons again, but that flavor was gone forever.

At that time, Chu Wanning had not yet completely broken off all relations with him. Maybe due to a guilty conscience, seeing the way Mo Ran stayed kneeling in front of Shi Mei’s coffin in a stupor, Chu Wanning had quietly gone to the kitchen, kneaded dough and chopped fillings, and carefully folded a few wontons. But Mo Ran had seen before he could finish. Mo Ran, who had just lost his true love, couldn’t tolerate this at all. It had seemed to him as if Chu Wanning was mocking him, a clumsy attempt at copying, a deliberate stab.

Shi Mei was dead. Chu Wanning could have saved him, but had refused to help, and afterwards dared to try to make Mo Ran wontons in place of Shi Mei. Had he thought that would make Mo Ran happy?

Mo Ran had rushed into the kitchen and knocked everything over. Plump white wontons had rolled all over the floor.

He’d roared at Chu Wanning, “Who the fuck do you think you are? Do you have any right to use the things he used? To make the food he did? Shi Mei is

dead, are you happy now? Or do you have to hound all your disciples to death or madness before you're satisfied? Chu Wanning! There is no one left in this world who could make those wontons ever again. No matter how much you imitate him, you'll never even come close!"

Eating this bowl of wontons now, he was overjoyed, and also deeply moved. He kept smiling as he ate, but his eyes grew slightly moist. Thankfully the candlelight was dim, and Shi Mei couldn't see such minute details of his expression clearly.

Mo Ran said, "Shi Mei."

"Mm?"

"Thank you."

Shi Mei paused for a second, then smiled gently. "Isn't it just a bowl of wontons? There's no need to be so formal, if you like it, I'll make it for you more often."

Mo Ran wanted to say, the thanks is not just for the wontons.

Thank you also, in both this lifetime and the last, for being the only person to never look down on me, who didn't mind my origins, who didn't care about the fourteen years I'd spent struggling to survive by any means, fair or foul.

Thank you also, because if not for the fact that I remembered you back then, when I was first reborn, I probably would have killed Rong Jiu, repeated a grave mistake, and walked the same bitter path as before.

Thankfully I was reborn before your death. I will definitely protect you this time. If anything were to happen to you, even if that cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning won't save you, I will.

But there was no way he could say any of this.

In the end, Mo Ran finished the soup without saying anything, leaving not even a scrap of chopped scallion. He licked his lips as if still wanting more, dimples deep and charming, looking cute as a fuzzy kitten.

"Can I have more tomorrow?"

Shi Mei didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Don't you want to try something else? Won't you get tired of it?"

"I'll never get tired of your wontons, as long as you don't get tired of me!"

Shi Mei laughed, shaking his head. "I'm not sure how much flour is left. If there isn't enough flour for wontons, how about egg in sweet soup instead? I remember you liked that one too."

"Okie dokie! As long as you make it, anything is fine."

Mo Ran was elated, so happy he could roll around hugging the quilt.

Look how kind^[16] Shi Mei is; Chu Wanning, go ahead and whip me! There's a beauty to take care of me if I'm laid out on the bed, hehehe!

Just thinking about that Shizun of his lit a flame of anger in the midst of his gentle sentiments.

Mo Ran dug resentfully into the crack between the bed and the headboard once again, cursing internally, what Yuheng of the Night Sky, what Beidou Immortal, all bullshit!

Chu Wanning, this lifetime, just you wait and see!!

Author's Notes:

Shi Mei making wontons:
Ink Feed Fish: Eat, eat, eat!

Shizun making wontons:
Ink Feed Fish: Toss, toss, toss!

Ink Feed Fish from Sisheng Peak wasted food, and disrespected farmer's hard work. Is this the disgrace of human nature or the moral bankruptcy? Tune in for today's 《Constitutional Discussions》

Reality:

Shizun's cooking tastes really bad, his disciples have lost faith in the various Shizun Brand culinary products.

Ch.8 This Venerable One Gets Punished

Mo Ran laid on the bed like a dead fish for three whole days. His wounds had only just healed a bit when he received a summons, telling him to get the hell to the Red Lotus Pavilion to do manual labor.

This was part of the punishment as well; Mo Ran couldn't go down the mountain during the period of confinement, but neither could he just sit around. And so he would help out by doing odd jobs around the sect.

These odd jobs were generally things like helping the cafeteria lady at Mengpo Hall wash dishes, giving the three hundred sixty five stone lions on the pillars of Naihe Bridge a scrub down, transcribing copies of files and scriptures stale and dry, so on and so forth.

But just what kind of place was the Red Lotus Pavilion? It was the residence of that bastard Chu Wanning, the cursed place that everyone called Red Lotus Hell.

Very few people at Sisheng Peak had gone there. Of the ones who had, every single one had come back with either their arms or else their legs broken.

Thus, in addition to Red Lotus Hell, Chu Wanning's residence had another nickname that was even more down to earth: Pavilion of Broken Legs.

The sect disciples had an inside joke: "The Pavilion hides a beauty, the beauty holds Tianwen. Enter through the gate of broken legs, feel the agony of getting your legs broken. If you want your meridians busted, look no further than Yuheng Elder."

There was once a female disciple who had laughed in the face of death, whose lechery reached the skies. She had actually dared to thirst after Yuheng Elder's beauty, and snuck to the southern peak on a moonless night to climb onto the roof, hoping to peek at the Elder as he bathed.

The outcome was obvious. That female warrior was escorted by Tianwen to the very line between life and death, and had been laid out on the bed for no less than one hundred miserable days.

Furthermore, Chu Wanning had declared that should there be any more transgression, he'd poke out the eyes of the interlopers directly.

Do you see? What blunt boorishness! What insensitive gestures! What a loathsome man!

Within the sect, there were a number of naive and foolish young girls who, thinking that they were girls and that Yuheng Elder would pity them and show compassion, would giggle and tease, hoping boldly to arouse his attention. However, once the elder butchered that female delinquent, no one dared attempt to hit on him anymore.

The Yuheng Elder was indiscriminate when it came to lashing, having none of the disposition of a proper gentleman. Other than his face being pretty, there was nothing about him that was acceptable—that was the critique from the disciples within the sect.

The little messenger shidi looked at Mo Ran with sympathy in his eyes, and tried to hold back but in the end, he still couldn't. "Mo-Shixiong..."

"Hm?"

"...Yuheng Elder's temper is so bad, no one who enters the Red Lotus Pavilion can come out standing. Why don't you go see if maybe you could say your wounds haven't healed and beg Yuheng Elder to let you go wash dishes instead?"

Mo Ran was very grateful for this shidi's compassionate buddha heart, but he still rejected the idea.

Beg Chu Wanning?

Please. He didn't want to be served by Tianwen for another round.

Thus he dressed himself with immense effort, and dragged his heavy feet to walk towards the southern summit of Sisheng Peak with great reluctance.

Red Lotus Pavilion, Red Lotus Hell. There was not a single soul in sight for a hundred miles around Chu Wanning's residence.

No one wanted to go close to where he lived; Chu Wanning's terrible taste and unpredictable temper made everyone in the sect stay far away, only watching with respect.

Mo Ran was still somewhat nervous, not knowing what Chu Wanning would make him do as punishment. His thoughts ran wild for the entirety of his journey to the peak of the southern summit. After crossing through a dense field of bamboo groves, a large expanse of vivid crimson red lotuses came into view.

It was only early morning just then; the sun had only just risen from the east, reflecting a dazzling gleam in the horizon. Through the heavenly lotus pads in the pond grew stalks that connected the fiery red skies with the crimson blossoms, each absorbing and reflecting the other, amplifying their radiance, truly impressive to behold. Upon the pond, a winding zig-zag bridge led to the pavilion that stood in quiet elegance. Behind it, a mountainous backdrop that streamed with curtains of waterfalls, beads of water like shards of crystals beating at the rocks clinkingly at the bottom, watery mist steaming, light shimmering through the haze, casting an ethereal ambiance amidst the calm.

How Mo Ran felt about all this was:
Ugh.

No matter how beautiful, wherever Chu Wanning lived would be all UGH to him!

Look how excessively lavish, how wastefully bountiful! The dormitory where the disciples slept was tightly cramped, each room given very little space. Yet look at Yuheng Elder; he was just one person, but he'd taken over an entire mountain top, and had even dug three giant ponds, planting an abundance of lotus flowers. Alright, fine. Those lotus flowers were said to be of unique breeds and could be made into medicines of rare quality, but——

Anyway, it was an eyesore. It really was too bad he couldn't just set fire to this pavilion and burn it down!

Nonetheless, grousing was nothing more than grousing. Since he was only sixteen and powerless to compete with Shizun, Mo Ran still approached Chu Wanning's residence to stand at the front entrance. He squinted his eyes into a smile and called out with a disgustingly sweet voice, pretending to be a lowly pleb.

"This disciple Mo Ran greets Shizun."

"En. Come in."

It was a huge mess inside the house. That cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning was dressed all in white, the lapels of his robes crisscrossed high and tight, giving him an ascetic, chaste air. Today his hair was up in a tall ponytail, and he was seated on the ground surrounded by mechanical parts, wearing a pair of black metal gauntlets, and biting a brush between his lips.

He glanced at Mo Ran without any emotion, and with the brush in his mouth, he said, voice muffled, "Come here."

Mo Ran went over.

It really was a little difficult because there wasn't any space left in the house for a person to walk; blueprints, broken logs, and metal parts were scattered all over the place.

Mo Ran's brows twitched. In the previous life he had never entered Chu Wanning's room. To know that a poised, handsome man such as he lived in such a mess...it was an undescribable feeling.

"Shizun, what are you doing?"

"The Holy Night Guardian^[17]."

"Huh?"

Chu Wanning was a little grumpy, probably because there was a brush in his mouth and it wasn't easy to talk. "The Holy Night Guardian."

Mo Ran mutedly glanced at the parts strewn about all over the floor.

This Shizun of his also had the title Chu-zongshi, which wasn't just an empty title. If he had to speak the truth, Chu Wanning was a remarkable man; whether it was his three holy weapons, his barrier repairing powers, or his mechanical engineering skills, they all deserved the name "highest of the peak". This was also why no matter how bad his temper was, how difficult it was to please him, every major cultivation sect fought over who could keep him.

As for this 'Holy Night Guardian', the reborn Mo Ran was more than knowledgeable of it.

This was a mechanical armor Chu Wanning had created; it was cheap in price but very strong and effective in battle, and could protect the common folks in the lower cultivation world from demonic intrusions at night.

In the previous lifetime, the completed Holy Night Guardian had been something that nearly each household owned. Each of the armors was priced at around the same price as a broom, and was more effective than pictures of door guardians and their open, teeth-baring mouths.

After Chu Wanning had passed away, those Holy Night Guardians still protected the impoverished families who couldn't afford the services of a cultivator. Such heartfelt compassion, when compared to the indifference with which he treated his disciples...heh, it filled Mo Ran with contempt.

Mo Ran sat down and looked at the Holy Night Guardian that was nothing more than mere parts at the moment, events of the past drifting through his mind. Unable to resist, he reached out and picked up one of the finger joints of one of the Holy Night Guardians to examine.

Chu Wanning clicked together the tenon and mortise of the parts in his hands, and finally freed a hand to take away the brush that had been between his lips. He glared at Mo Ran. "That one was just oiled, don't touch."

"Oh..." Mo Ran put down the finger joint and schooled his thoughts. Still playing the role of one that was cute and harmless, he asked with a happy smile, "Did Shizun summon me here to have me help?"

"En," Chu Wanning said.
"What do you want me to do?"

"Clean up the house."

Mo Ran's smile froze, and he looked at the room that appeared like it had just undergone an earthquake. "....."

Chu Wanning was a genius when it came to the art of spells, but an idiot when it came to everyday life.

After cleaning up the fifth teacup that had been shattered but hadn't been swept away, Mo Ran finally couldn't take it anymore. "Shizun, how long has it been since you last cleaned? My god, it's so messy!"

Chu Wanning was looking at a blueprint, and didn't look up even when he heard the question. "Around a year."

Mo Ran: "....."

"Where do you usually sleep?"

"What?" That blueprint probably had some problems; Chu Wanning was more prickly than usual at being interrupted. He ruffled his own hair and answered irritably, "On the bed, of course."

Mo Ran took a look at that bed, which was piled high with various gadgets and gimmicks that were almost finished. There were also saws, axes, sickles, and other such tools, each exceedingly sharp, glinting with a steely light.

Amazing. How did this person sleep without chopping his own head off?

After laboring for over half a day, all the sawdust and dirt from the floor was enough to fill three dustpans. After wiping down the shelves, more than ten white

rags were now black. By the time noon came around, only half the place had been organized.

Fucking Chu Wanning. He really was more evil than a harpy.

Cleaning a room didn't seem like a severe punishment on the surface, and if anyone heard it wouldn't sound like anything laborious either. However, who knew it was to sweep up a hellish place that hadn't been cleaned for three hundred and sixty five days? Nevermind that he was covered in lashes right now, even if he was perfectly healthy, a tiresome torture like this would kill him half dead!

"Shizun..."

"Hm?"

"This pile of clothes of yours..." Had probably been sitting there for three months.

Chu Wanning finally finished connecting an arm of the Holy Night Guardian. He rubbed his sore shoulders and looked up to glance at the laundry basket that was piled high as a mountain with robes and said coolly, "I'll wash them myself."

Mo Ran let out a sigh of relief. Thank the heavens. Then afterwards, he was a little curious, "Eh? Shizun knows how to do laundry?"

Chu Wanning glanced at him. After a moment, he replied coldly, "How hard can it be? Throw it into the water, soak a bit, then fish it up to lay dry. Done."

"....." Really. What would the ladies who secretly admired and crushed on Chu-zongshi think if they knew about this? Mo Ran wholeheartedly believed that this man was only good for looks and nothing else, repulsive and disgusting. If this went out, how many tender hearts would be broken?

"It's getting late. Follow me to the cafeteria and do the rest when we come back."

Mengpo Hall was bustling with activity, people coming and going. Sisheng Peak disciples gathered to eat together in groups of three to five. Chu Wanning placed a few dishes on his wooden tray and went to sit quietly in a corner.

Gradually, a twenty feet radius area centered around him became completely deserted.

No one dared to sit near Yuheng Elder, on the off chance that something upset him and Tianwen would come out for a whipping. Chu Wanning was aware of this but didn't mind in the least. He sat by himself like a cold beauty, partaking of his meal in a refined manner.

But it was a little different today.

Mo Ran had come here with him, and naturally had to stay with him.

Everyone else was afraid of Chu Wanning, and Mo Ran was no different. But at least he had already died once, so he was not too frightened of Chu Wanning.

Especially after the dread from their first meeting had faded away, and the loathing he'd felt toward Chu Wanning in the last life had slowly re-emerged. So what if he was ferocious? He'd still died by Mo Ran's own hands in the previous lifetime.

Mo Ran sat down facing him, leisurely chewing the sweet and sour ribs in his bowl. *Crunch crunch*, a small hill of bones materialized speedily.

Chu Wanning suddenly slammed down his chopsticks.

Mo Ran blinked.

“...Can you not smack your lips when you eat?”

“I’m chewing ribs, how do I chew without smacking lips?”

“Then don’t eat ribs.”

“But I like ribs.”

“Then get lost and go eat elsewhere.”

Their argument grew louder and louder, and some disciples were already starting to steal glances toward them.

Mo Ran suppressed the urge to flip the bowl of food over onto Chu Wanning’s head. His lips, gleaming with oil, pursed into a line. After a while, he squinted his eyes, the corners of his lips curving into a sweet smile.

“Don’t yell so loudly Shizun. If others hear, won’t they make fun of us?”

Chu Wanning had always had a thin face, and sure enough, he lowered his voice, saying quietly, “Scram.”

Mo Ran laughed so hard he almost fell over.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

“Ah, don’t glare at me Shizun, please eat, eat. I’ll try to eat quietly.”

Having had his fun, Mo Ran went back to his good and obedient act, and indeed are his ribs much less noisily.

Chu Wanning was amenable to coaxing but not coercion; seeing that Mo Ran had done as told, his expression relaxed a bit and he no longer looked so bitter and resentful. He lowered his head, and continued elegantly eating his meal of vegetables and tofu.

This peace did not last long before Mo Ran started acting up again.

He didn’t know why he did what he did either; what he did know was that every time he saw Chu Wanning in this lifetime, he just wanted to piss him off, one way or another.

Thus, Chu Wanning noticed that, although Mo Ran no longer chewed loudly, he was now eating with his hands, fingers covered in grease, sauce shiny and dripping.

The veins at Chu Wanning’s temples bulged angrily as he tried to bear with it.

He lowered his gaze, not looking at Mo Ran, and focused on eating his own food.

Maybe it was because Mo Ran was having too good of a time eating, but forgetting form and manner, he finished chewing a bone and carelessly tossed it into Chu Wanning’s bowl.

Chu Wanning glared at the messily gnawed rib, the air around him freezing visibly with frightening speed.

"Mo Ran...!!!"

"Shizun..." Mo Ran was slightly terrified, but even he couldn't tell how much of that was real and how much was fake. "That...uh, I didn't mean to do that."

Yeah right.

"....."

"Don't be mad, I'll pick it out right away."

Saying so, he really extended his chopsticks and speedily stuck them into Chu Wanning's bowl to retrieve the offending rib bone.

Chu Wanning's face was blue; he looked like he was about to faint from disgust.

Mo Ran's eyelashes quivered, delicate features looking somewhat pitiful as if he'd been wronged. "Does Shizun find me that repulsive?"

"....."

"Shizun, I'm really sorry."

Forget it.

Chu Wanning thought to himself.

There was no need to argue with those who were younger.

He abandoned the urge to call forth Tianwen and give Mo Ran a beating, but his appetite had been wiped out. He stood up. "I'm full."

"Eh? That's all you're going to eat? Shizun you've barely touched your food."

Chu Wanning said coldly, "I wasn't hungry."

Mo Ran was delighted inside, but his mouth kept speaking sweet words. "Then I'm not eating any more either. Let us go back to Red Lotus He——cough, Red Lotus Pavilion."

Chu Wanning's eyes narrowed. "Us?" His gaze was disdainful. "There is no 'us'. Elders and juniors have an order and distinction, watch your words."

Mo Ran responded agreeably on the outside, eyes curved in a smile, clever, obedient and adorable.

But he thought on the inside, elders and juniors? Watch my words?

Heh, if Chu Wanning only knew what had happened in the previous lifetime, then he would realize—in the end, in this world, only him, Mo Weiyu, was the superior.

No matter how noble and arrogant Chu Wanning was, how unparalleled, in the end he had still been reduced to a mere piece of mud on the bottom of Mo Ran's boots, living on without purpose only by Mo Ran's grace.

Mo Ran walked faster to match Shizun's pace, still smiling brightly.

If Shi Mei was the pure white moonlight of his heart, then Chu Wanning was the piece of fish bone stuck in his throat. He would pull it out and crush it, or else swallow it and let it be dissolved by stomach acid.

In this reborn life, he could forgive anyone.
But he would absolutely never forgive Chu Wanning.

But, it seemed that Chu Wanning didn't intend to let him off easy either. Mo Ran stood before the library at Red Lotus Hell, staring at the fifty bookshelves, each ten levels high, and thought that he had surely misheard.

"Shizun, what...did you say?"

Chu Wanning answered indifferently, "Wipe every book in here."

"....."

"And catalogue them."

"....."

"I will be checking in the morning."

"!!!"

What the hell!!! He's gonna get stuck here at Red Lotus Hell overnight??

But he'd already made arrangements with Shi Mei to change his bandages tonight!!!

He opened his mouth to bargain, but Chu Wanning ignored him, turned around with a sweep of his sleeves and left for the machinery room, even closing the door behind him.

Date night summarily dashed, Mo Ran sunk deeply into his feelings of disdain for Chu Wanning—he wanted to burn all of Chu Wanning's books!!

Wait!

The gears in his head turned as he thought of an even more ruinous idea.....

Ch.9 This Venerable One Is Not An Actor

Chu Wanning's tastes were truly terrible.
Dry, tedious, despair-inducing.

Just look at the crappy books this shelf was stuffed with!

《Catalog of Ancient Barriers》, 《Illustrated Archive of Unusual Flora》, 《Linyi Rufeng Sect Zither Music Arrangement》, 《Plant Collection》. There were only a few books that counted as acceptable reading material, like 《Bashu Regional Travel Guide》 and 《Bashu Recipes》.

Mo Ran picked a few of the newer-looking books, the ones that Chu Wanning likely wouldn't read often, and doodled a bunch of porn on the pages.

As he drew, he thought to himself, heh, there are at least eight, if not ten thousand books here, who knows how long it would take for Chu Wanning to discover that a couple had been modified into forbidden books. By then, there would be no way to tell who had done it, and Chu Wanning would be stuck seething. He was really so unbelievably clever.

Thinking about it, Mo Ran couldn't help but snicker as he hugged the books in glee.

Mo Ran vandalized more than a dozen books without stopping, letting his imagination run wild and unconstrained, all kinds of erotic scenes appearing under his hand. His brushstrokes were alluring and elegant; the fabrics now

clinging to the figures as if just rising out of water, then sweeping as if wind-blown. If someone were to borrow books from Yuheng Elder and just so happened to pick these, one could easily imagine the kind of rumors that would spread——

“Yuheng Elder is truly a two-faced beast, to insert erotic paintings of men and women between the pages of 《Art of Meditation》 !”

“Yuheng Elder is a fraudulent master who hides comics of homosexual obscenity in his sword technique manuals!”

“Beidou Immortal’ my ass! He’s literally a beast in human clothing!”

The more Mo Ran thought about it the funnier it became, until he was rolling on the floor with laughter, holding his stomach and kicking his legs in glee. He was so absorbed that he didn’t even notice when someone appeared at the library doors.

And so, the sight that greeted Shi Mei as he approached was that of Mo Ran, rolling in a pile of books, laughing as if he had gone mad.

Shi Mei: “...A-Ran, what are you doing?”

Startled, Mo Ran sat up in a hurry, frantically covering up all the lewd drawings and putting on a more presentable face. “W-wiping the floor.”

Shi Mei held back a laugh. “With your clothes?”

“Ahem, I couldn’t find a cleaning rag. Anyway, moving on, what are you doing here so late, Shi Mei?”

“I couldn’t find you in your room, so I asked around and was told that you were at Shizun’s place.” Shi Mei stepped inside the library and helped Mo Ran clean up the books scattered all around on the floor, a gentle smile on his lips. “There wasn’t anything else that needed doing, so I came to see you.”

Mo Ran was overjoyed and overwhelmed. He pursed his lips; for some reason, his usual smoothness and charm were nowhere to be found, and he couldn’t actually think of what to say right now.

“Then...um...then please have a seat!” Mo Ran spun excitedly in place, then said, a little nervously, “I-I’ll go get some tea for you!”

“No need, I snuck here, there will be trouble if Shizun finds out.”

Mo Ran scratched his head. “I guess...” Chu Wanning, that freak! I’ll topple him sooner or later, and get out from under his thumb!

“You probably haven’t eaten yet right? I brought you dinner.”

Mo Ran’s eyes lit up. “Wontons?”

“Pfft, you’re really not tired of them huh. Red Lotus Pavilion is a bit far, I was afraid the wontons would be all stuck together by the time I got here, so I didn’t bring any. Here, see if this stir-fry is to your taste?”

Shi Mei opened the food box he brought, revealing the red-colored dishes inside. A plate of sh unfeng pig ears, a plate of yuxiang pork strips, a plate of kungpao diced chicken, a plate of chopped cucumber, and a bowl of rice.

“Ah, you added peppers this time?”

"Just a little, so you don't go into withdrawal," Shi Mei said, smiling. They both loved spicy foods, of course he understood the concept of no spice no joy. "But your wounds haven't fully healed yet, so I only put a little bit, just to add some flavor. Better than not having even a hint of red."

Mo Ran chewed on his chopsticks happily, dimples sweet like honey in the candle light. "Wah! I'm going to cry in gratitude!"

Shi Mei suppressed a laugh. "The food will be cold by the time you're done crying. You can cry after you've eaten."

Mo Ran cheered, chopsticks flying with impressive speed.

Mo Ran always ate like a starved dog; Chu Wanning hated the unseemly way he ate, but Shi Mei wouldn't mind.

Shi Mei was always so gentle, laughing and telling him to eat slower, while offering him a cup of tea. Before long, the plates were empty; Mo Ran patted his full belly with a content sigh, eyes happily squinted. "That hit the spot....."

Shi Mei asked with an air of nonchalance, "Which tastes better, wontons or these dishes?"

When it came to food, Mo Ran was dedicated in the same way he was to his first love. He tilted his head, clear black eyes soft and fixed on Shi Mei as he grinned. "Wontons."

"....." Shimei shook his head, smiling. He spoke again after a while, "A-Ran, let me help change your bandages and apply new medicine."

The medicinal salve was made by Madam Wang.

Madam Wang had been a disciple of the medical sect "Guyue'ye"^[18]; her martial aptitude was low and she disliked fighting, but she was fond of studying medicine. Sisheng Peak had an herbal medicine garden, and she had personally planted many precious herbs there, so the sect's supply of medicine never ran low.

Mo Ran took off his top and sat, back facing Shi Mei. The scars on his back still faintly hurt, but as Shi Mei's warm fingers gently rubbed in and spread the ointment, he gradually forgot about the pain, and started getting frisky thoughts instead.

"All done." Shi Mei wrapped new bandages around Mo Ran, and carefully tied a knot. "You can put your clothes back on now."

Mo Ran turned his head around to peek at Shi Mei. Under the dim yellow light of the candles, Shi Mei's skin was pale like snow. Mo Ran's desire flared up even more. His throat felt dry and he really didn't want to get dressed, but after a moment of hesitation, he still lowered his head and quickly draped his outer robe over his shoulders.

"Shi Mei."

"Mm?"

Just the two of them in this library, secluded and hidden. This mood was quite good. Mo Ran originally wanted to say some earth-shakingly romantic poetry, but unfortunately he was the kind of illiterate who could make even his own era's name something like "Cock". He choked on his words for a good while, until his face turned red, but only managed to choke out three words: "You're really nice."

"Don't mention it, it's just a matter of course."

"I'm also going to be really nice to you." Mo Ran carefully controlled his tone to be calm, but his palms were sweating non-stop, betraying the stormy waves in his heart. "When I become strong, I won't let anyone bully you. Not even Shizun."

Shi Mei didn't know why he was suddenly saying these things. He hesitated for a moment, but still gently replied, "Alright, then, I'll be counting on A-Ran from now on."

"Mhm..."

Mo Ran mumbled a response, but grew increasingly fidgety under Shi Mei's expressive gaze. He didn't dare to keep looking, and so lowered his head.

He was always meticulously careful toward this person, determined in his dedication.

"Ah, Shizun asked you to clean this many books? And catalogue them overnight too?"

In front of the person he liked, Mo Ran absolutely had to save face. "It's not too bad, I can do it, just gotta pick up the pace a little."

Shi Mei said, "Let me help."

"No way, if Shizun finds out, he'll punish you too," Mo Ran spoke resolutely. "It's getting late, you should go back and get some rest, we have class tomorrow morning."

Shi Mei held his hand, laughing softly. "Don't worry, he won't notice. We'll be super quiet....."

He didn't even finish talking before an ice-cold voice spoke up.
"And what exactly are you doing super quietly?"

Without them knowing, Chu Wanning had come out from the machine room. His expression was cold, and his phoenix eyes were filled with endless frost. He stared at them without any expression on his face from where he stood at the door to the library in a thin layer of white robes. His gaze paused on their clasped hands for a moment before moving away.

"Shi Mingjing, Mo Weiyu, you've got some nerve."

Shi Mei's face paled instantly and he abruptly let go of Mo Ran's hand, saying in a small voice, "Shizun..."

Mo Ran also recognized that the situation was bad, and lowered his head, "Shizun."

Chu Wanning stepped inside, ignoring Mo Ran to look down instead at Shi Mei, who was kneeling on the floor. He spoke coolly, "There are barriers set throughout the Red Lotus Pavilion. Did you really think I wouldn't know if an unexpected guest came in?"

Shi Mei lowered his head to the floor, frightened. "This disciple was wrong."

Mo Ran panicked. "Shizun, Shi Mei just came by to help me change bandages, he was just about to leave, please don't scold him."

Shi Mei also panicked. "Shizun, this has nothing to do with Mo-shidi. This disciple was wrong, and is willing to accept punishment."

"....."

Chu Wanning's face was starting to turn blue.

He'd barely even said anything, and these two were already hurrying to try and cover for one another, as if he was some kind of scourge they had to band together against. Chu Wanning was silent for a while, managing to suppress the twitch of his eyebrows with some difficulty. He spoke in a detached manner, "Such compassion between fellow disciples, how touching. Looks like I'm the only bad guy in this room, then"

Mo Ran: "Shizun..."

"...Don't call me."

Chu Wanning shook out his wide sleeves, unwilling to keep talking. Mo Ran wasn't sure why he was so mad; maybe it was because he'd always hated people being touchy feely in front of him, no matter what kind of touchy feely, all of it dirtied his eyes.

The three people were quiet for a long while.

Chu Wanning suddenly turned to leave.

The rims of Shi Mei's eyes were red when he looked up, helpless and confused. "Shizun?"

"Copy the sect rules ten times. You can go back."

Shi Mei lowered his eyelashes, paused for a moment, and softly replied, "... Understood."

Mo Ran remained kneeling in the same spot.

Shi Mei stood up, glanced at Mo Ran, and hesitated. After a long while, he knelt back down to plead with Chu Wanning.

"Shizun, Mo-shidi's injuries have only just healed. Might this disciple be so bold as to beseech you to go easy on him."

Chu Wanning did not respond from where he stood alone under the lantern's flickering candle light. After a while, he turned his head toward them suddenly, sharp eyebrows lifted and eyes scorching, angry rebuke on his lips.

"Aren't you just full of nonsense. Still not leaving?!"

Chu Wanning was exceedingly handsome but completely lacking in gentleness, and even scarier when mad. Shi Mei shuddered fearfully and quickly left with a bow to avoid further provoking Shizun and bring Mo Ran even more trouble.

With only the two of them left in the library, Mo Ran secretly let out a sigh before saying, "Shizun, this disciple was wrong. This disciple will continue the cataloguing immediately."

Unexpectedly, Chu Wanning said, without even turning his head, "You can go back if you're tired."

Mo Ran's head snapped up.

Chu Wanning continued icily, "I won't keep you."

Why would he let me off this easily? It must be a trap!

Mo Ran thought himself clever. "I'm not leaving."

Chu Wanning paused, then smiled coldly. "...Fine, suit yourself."

Saying so, he swept his sleeves, turned, and left.
Mo Ran was stunned—it wasn't a trap? He'd thought for sure that Chu Wanning was going to give him another round of lashings with the willow vine.

It wasn't till well into the night that he finished. Mo Ran yawned, and left the library.

The night was already so late, yet a dim yellow light could still be seen from Chu Wanning's bedroom.

Eh? That pesky demon still hadn't gone to bed?

Mo Ran went over to bid Chu Wanning goodnight before leaving. Once inside, he noticed that Chu Wanning had already fallen asleep, it was just that the forgetful man had neglected to put out the candles before going to bed.

Or maybe he'd passed out from exhaustion in the middle of making something. Mo Ran figured that that was probably what had happened when he saw the prototype Holy Night Guardian pieced together by the bedside, the metal gloves that Chu Wanning hadn't taken off, and the half piece of mechanical clasp still tightly gripped in his hand.

Chu Wanning was not so harsh and cold when asleep. He was curled up on the bed that was stacked with machine parts, saws, and axes. There were too many things spread out everywhere and not much space left to accommodate a person, and so he was huddled up tightly, body hunched, long lashes lowered. The sight was unexpectedly lonely.

Mo Ran stared at him blankly for a moment.

Just what...had Chu Wanning been so angry about today?
Was it just because Shi Mei had trespassed on the Red Lotus Pavilion, and had tried to help him organize the books?

Mo Ran approached the bed and rolled his eyes. He leaned down near Chu Wanning's ear, and with a very, very quiet voice, experimentally called out, "Shizun?"

"...Mm..." Chu Wanning groaned softly, and hugged the cold machine parts in his arms even more tightly. He was in a deep slumber, breaths even. The sharp metal glove still on his hand lay next to his face, looking quite like the claws of a cat or leopard.

Seeing that he probably wouldn't wake up anytime soon, Mo Ran felt a jolt in his heart and narrowed his eyes, the corners of his lips curving into a mischievous grin. He hovered over Chu Wanning's ear, testing with a low voice, "Shizun, wake up."

"....."

"Shizun?"

"....."

"Chu Wanning?"

"....."

"Heh, he's really asleep." Mo Ran was delighted. He propped his arm next to the pillow and looked at him with a grin. "Perfect, I'll take this chance to settle the score with you."

Unaware that someone wanted to settle the score with him, Chu Wanning remained fast asleep, handsome features appearing quite peaceful.

Mo Ran assumed an imposing posture. Unfortunately he'd grown up in a pleasure house and didn't have much in the way of formal education, instead being more influenced by street arguments and folk stories. The phrases he cobbled together were thus especially lame and laughable.

"Chu Wanning, you audacious radical, you treacherous liar, you dare look down on your Honored Emperor, you...hmm, you..."

He scratched his head, having run out of words. Even when he'd become the emperor, the words that had come out of his mouth were either this bitch or that bastard. But these words seemed ill-unfitting for Chu Wanning.

He racked his brain for a good while before suddenly remembering something a big sister back at the pleasure house used to say. Although he wasn't too sure what it meant, it seemed ok enough. Brows twisted, he snapped:

"You fickle, ungrateful, despicable little donkey hoof, do you acknowledge your misdeeds?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

"If you don't speak, this venerable one shall consider it a confession!"

Chu Wanning let out another groan, perhaps disturbed by the noise, but continued to sleep while holding onto the machine parts.

"Your transgressions are grave; according to the law, this Venerable One sentences you...hm, sentences you to Zuixing [19]! Liu-gonggong [20]!"

Only after calling out of habit did he realize that Liu-gonggong was already a person of his past life.

Mo Ran contemplated for a moment, and decided to lower himself to act out the gonggong's part. So he responded in a flattering tone, "Your Highness, your old servant is present."

Then he cleared his throat and said solemnly, "Carry out the punishment immediately."

"As you command, Your Highness."

Alright, done with the formalities.

Mo Ran flexed his fingers and began to "carry out the punishment" towards Chu Wanning.

This so-called Zuixing didn't actually exist; Mo Ran had made it up on the spot.

Then how should this improvised punishment be carried out?

The once-tyrant emperor Mo Ran solemnly cleared his throat. Gaze cold and wicked, he slowly pressed in close to the face that looked frigid as a clear spring in a snowy valley, and gradually drew near that pair of light colored lips.

And then...

Mo Ran stopped. Glaring at Chu Wanning, he cursed, enunciating each word slowly,

"Chu Wanning, fuck you and your peerless pettiness."

Pa. Pa.

Two slaps in the air.

Hehe, punishment complete!
Fuck yeah!

Mo Ran was in the midst of rejoicing when he felt a sudden prick in his neck and a change in the atmosphere. He looked down abruptly, and was met by a pair of cold and lofty phoenix eyes.

Mo Ran: “.....”

Chu Wanning's voice was like the shattering of ice, hard to tell if it's more elegant or frosty. “What are you doing.”

“This Venerable One...puh. Your old serv...puh puh puh!” Fortunately Mo Ran had spoken softly. Chu Wanning frowned a little, but seemed to not have heard. Struck by a sudden idea, Mo Ran reached out and slapped the air near Chu Wanning's face two more times.

“.....”

Faced with his Shizun's darkening expression, the once-emperor of the world gave a mollifying grin. “This- this disciple was killing mosquitoes for Shizun.”

Author's Notes:

Mo Ran

Courtesy Name: Weiyu

Posthumous name: His honorable big radish deity, homosexual purple longevity saint, squeaky spirit shizun thruster, certified shithead top thespian, general manager five thunder pinnacle big steamed man, stinky no shame realm, Taxian Emperor^[21]

Career: Emperor (dead)

Societal Image: Illiterate

Current Fav: Shi Mei

Fav Food: (hand crossed out) Chu Wanning (hand crossed out), Spicy Oil Wontons

Dislikes: Being abandoned by others

Height: 186 before death, this venerable one became a lively youth after reincarnation, maximum height has yet to be reached, why should it be announced publicly? Hmmph Hmmph!

📎 https://seven771.lofter.com/post/2631b4_1c5d71f59

[1] The original text is a pun on the slang for bastard, ‘Wang Ba’, which means turtle. The character for ‘Wang’ is the same as the word for ‘King’, which is probably why Mo Ran thought it was clever.

[2] The original text is a pun on the slang for cock, penis, dick, ‘Ji Ba’. Both ‘Cease Battle’ and ‘Cock’ have the same pronunciation.

[3] The original text adds another pun ‘Yuan’ to the cock pun. ‘Yuan’, different characters, same pronunciation, means “The First of” and “Ball” respectively.

[4] The original text is a pun on the pronunciation for ‘Nobly Chaste’, which sounds exactly like ‘Steamed’.

[5] The art of manipulating qi so that one is weightless and light on one's feet

[6] Older martial brother

[7] 女 [Ya] i.e. 女头 essentially means “little girl”

[8] 乐坊 is an establishment where girls sing, dance, and/or play instruments to entertain the patrons, and sometimes sell their bodies. Think, the Hollywood *Memoirs of*

a Geisha film.

[9] The first line of [《折杨柳》](#) by 张九龄, a Tang dynasty poet

[10] Chu Wanning's title: 晚夜玉衡 Yuheng is Ursa Major, and 北斗仙尊 Beidou Xian-Zun is the Holy Grace of the Big Dipper.

[11] Yanluo Hall - 阎罗殿 Yanluo is the king of hell.

[12] Naihe Bridge - 奈何桥 The bridge between life and death, one must cross it to be reborn.

[13] Mengpo Hall - 孟婆堂 Mengpo is hell's soup lady, she distributes soup to people before they are reborn, the soup erases the person's memories from the past.

[14] Save face = 要脸, pronounced as Yao Lian, same as the disciple's name

[15] ...it's an ahoge...he grew an entire ahoge...

[16] 贤慧 wise and kind in a wife kind of way

[17] 夜游神 Ye You Shen, lit. night-wandering deity.

[18] 孤月夜 Gu Yue Ye - Lonemoon Night

[19] 嘴刑 lit. mouth punishment

[20] 公公 eunuch; royal servants were typically eunuchs in ancient China.

[21] 太上大萝卜天仙基佬紫长生圣吱昭灵捅师尊证王八攻戏精总管五雷轰顶大蒸人臭
不要脸境界踏仙帝君... it's a multitude of puns on the taoist name of JiaJing Emperor

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.10 This Venerable One Goes on His First Mission

Fortunately for Mo Ran, Chu Wanning had not heard much of his play-pretend “Zuixing”, and he managed to scrape by with some made-up nonsense, but only just.

It was already very late by the time Mo Ran got back to his room. He took a nap and attended morning classes as usual the next day. After morning classes came his favorite morning activity: breakfast.

As morning classes ended, Mengpo Hall gradually filled with people.

Mo Ran sat across from Shi Mei; Xue Meng had come late and the spot next to Shi Mei had already been taken by someone else, so he could only sit reluctantly next to Mo Ran with a gloomy face.

If Mo Ran were asked what the best aspect of Sisheng Peak’s teachings was to him, he would definitely say: that this sect’s cultivation doesn’t require fasting.

Unlike the lofty, ethereal sects of the upper cultivation world, Sisheng Peak’s cultivation method didn’t require abstinence from meat or any other foods, so the food here had always been sumptuous.

Mo Ran drank from a bowl of savory spicy soup, slurping up the peanut crumbs and crunchy soybean inside. A plate of crisply yellowed pan-fried buns he’d ordered just for Shi Mei sat in front.

Xue Meng glanced sideways at Mo Ran and said mockingly, “Mo Ran, it’s really quite incredible that you went to Red Lotus Hell and actually managed to walk back out on your own two legs. Truly inspirational.”

Mo Ran responded without even bothering to lift his head, “Of course, who do you think I am.”

“Who do I think you are?” Xue Meng sneered. “Just because Shizun didn’t break your legs, you’ve already forgotten which stick of onion you are^[1]?”

“Oh, so I’m a stick of onion, what are you then.”

Xue Meng scoffed. “I am Shizun’s top disciple.”

“Self-proclaimed? Hey why don’t you go ask Shizun for his seal of approval so you can frame it and hang it on the wall? You owe at least that much to your title of top disciple.”

Xue Meng snapped his chopsticks with a crack.

Shi Mei hastened to play mediator. “Please don’t fight, hurry and eat.”

Xue Meng: “...Hmph.”

Mo Ran mimicked him with a shit-eating grin plastered on his face: “Hmph.”

Xue Meng bristled, smacking the table. “How dare you!”

Seeing the situation rapidly deteriorating, Shi Mei hurriedly held Xue Meng back. “Young master, everyone’s watching; eat, eat, don’t fight.”

These two's birth characters were truly incompatible; they were cousins but ended up fighting every time they met. Shi Mei tried without success to talk Xue Meng down, and had to resort to physically wedging himself between the two to ease the tension, placating left and right.

Now asking Xue Meng: "Young master, do you know when the Madam's cat is going to give birth?"

Xue Meng answered, "Oh, you mean A-Li? Mom was mistaken, it's not pregnant, just had a big belly from eating too much."

Shi Mei: "....."

Then asking Mo Ran: "A-Ran, do you still have to go to Shizun's place to do chores today?"

"Shouldn't have to anymore, everything that needed to be tidied up has been tidied. I'll help you with copying the sect rules today."

Shi Mei laughed. "Do you even have time to help me? Don't you have to copy them a hundred times yourself?"

Xue Meng raised an eyebrow, looking with some astonishment at Shi Mei, who usually didn't even put a single toe out of line. "How did you end up having to copy the rules too?"

Shi Mei looked embarrassed. All of a sudden, before he could speak, the sounds of conversation in the dining hall died down abruptly. All three of them turned around to see Chu Wanning enter Mengpo Hall, white robes billowing behind him. He walked to the food counters without any expression and started selecting pastries.

There were more than a thousand people here eating in the hall, but with the addition of just one Chu Wanning, it suddenly became quiet as a graveyard. All the disciples lowered their heads to munch on their food; if anyone talked, it was in the quietest of tones.

Watching Chu Wanning carry his tray to the corner he usually sat at, quietly eating congee by himself, Shi Mei let out a soft sigh and couldn't help but say, "Actually, I feel kind of sorry for Shizun sometimes."

Mo Ran glanced up. "How so?"

"Just look, no one dares to go near where he's sitting, no one even dares to talk loudly with him around. It was still ok when the Peak Lord was here, but without him around, he doesn't even have anyone to talk to, isn't that so lonely?"

Mo Ran humph'd. "He brought it on himself."

Xue Meng got angry again. "You dare to mock Shizun?"

"How am I mocking him? I'm just speaking the truth." Mo Ran put another bun in Shi Mei's plate. "With a temper like that, who would want to hang out with him?"

"You——!"

The shit-eating grin was back on Mo Ran's face as he peered at Xue Meng, speaking lazily, "You got a problem with it? Feel free to go sit with Shizun for your meals then, don't sit with us."

That shut Xue Meng right up.

He felt great respect for Chu Wanning, but he felt even greater fear, no different from anyone else. Angry and humiliated, but having nothing to say in retaliation, he gave the table leg two sound kicks, and sulked by himself.

Mo Ran was the picture of languid smugness, tauntingly directing a glance at the little phoenix. Then his gaze, across the crowd, landed on Chu Wanning.

He didn't know why, but looking at the only white-colored figure in the hall full of people dressed in deep blue with silver armor, he suddenly thought of that person sleeping curled up amongst the pile of cold metal last night

Shi Mei wasn't wrong, Chu Wanning really was quite pitiful.

But what of it? The more pitiful he was, the happier Mo Ran would be. Thinking about it, he couldn't help the quirk at the corner of his lips growing more apparent.

The days flew by.

Chu Wanning didn't call him to the Red Lotus Pavilion again; Mo Ran's daily chores became idle things like washing the dishes, feeding the chicks and ducklings Madam Wang kept, and weeding the medicinal herb garden.

The month of confinement was over in the blink of an eye.

Today, Madam Wang called Mo Ran to Loyalty Hall. She asked while patting his head, "A-Ran, how are your injuries?"

Mo Ran responded with a smile, "Thanks for worrying about me aunt, I'm all healed now."

"That's good. Be more mindful in the future, don't make such big mistakes and anger your Shizun again, understand?"

Mo Ran was an expert at acting pitiful. "Aunt, I understand~"

"And one more thing." Madam Wang retrieved a letter from the yellow rosewood small table. "It's been a full year since you entered the sect, that means it's time for you to take on exorcism duties. This letter from your uncle came by messenger pigeon yesterday; his instructions are for you to go down the mountain and complete this assignment once your confinement period ends."

Sisheng Peak's customs dictated that disciples had to go see the world and gain practical hands-on experience as exorcists after one full year in the sect.

On the first mission, the shizun would accompany the disciple and provide assistance as necessary; in addition, the disciple also needed to invite a fellow disciple along. This was to encourage camaraderie between the disciples, so that they understand the meaning of "loyalty of the heart evident, life or death unchanging".

Mo Ran, bright-eyed, accepted the assignment letter, tore it open, read in a hurry and immediately started grinning in glee.

Madam Wang said, worried, "A-Ran, your uncle entrusted you with a heavy responsibility for your mission in the hopes that you will be able to make a name for yourself. Yuheng Elder is a powerful cultivator, but swords are indiscriminate in battle, and he may not necessarily be able to protect you. Don't fool around too much, and make sure you don't take the enemy lightly."

"I won't, I won't!" Mo Ran waved his hands, grinning. "Don't worry, aunt, I'll take care of myself, no problem!" And he immediately ran off to pack.

"This child..." Madam Wang watched his retreating back, her gentle and graceful face lined with worry. "How is he so happy over just receiving a

mission?"

How could Mo Ran *not* be happy?

The mission from his uncle was to look into an incident at Butterfly Town at the request of a certain Landlord Chen.

Who cared what kind of ghost or ghoul it was, what was important was that, in the last lifetime, this was where he had fallen under the influence of a demonic poison and, in an addled state, forcibly kissed Shi Mei within the illusory realm. It had also been one of the very few times Mo Ran had gotten to be so intimate with Shi Mei. He was so ecstatic he was practically on cloud nine.

On top of that, because he had been under the influence of the demonic poison, Shi Mei couldn't even have complained. Free kiss! No consequences attached!

Mo Ran was so happy his eyes curved into crescents. He didn't even mind the fact that Chu Wanning also had to come along on the mission.

He could just leave the exorcising to the master while he flirted with Shi Mei, who would say no to this kind of easy work?

After inviting Shi Mei and reporting to Shizun, the three made their way to the troubled Butterfly Town on galloping horses.

This town's specialty produce was flowers. Fields of flowers stretched for many kilometers outside the residential area, and butterflies of all colors always fluttered about inside the town, thus the name.

It was already night by the time the three arrived, but the village entrance was bustling with activity. The beating of drums could be heard loud and clear as a procession of performers all dressed in red and playing the shawm turned out of an alleyway.

Shi Mei was puzzled. "Is this a marriage procession? Why is it at night?"

Chu Wanning said, "It's a ghost marriage."

Ghost marriage, also known as Yin marriage, was a tradition among the common people to match unmarried men and women who had died young in posthumous matrimony. This kind of tradition was rare in poorer areas, but Butterfly Town was quite prosperous, so the practice was common here.

The showy procession was divided into two lines, one carrying real satins and silks, the other carrying paper money and mock ingots, escorting a sedan decorated in red and white. The procession, lit with golden lanterns, made its way out of the village.

Mo Ran's group reined in their horses and stood to the side to let the ghost marriage procession pass. The sedan came near; inside was not a live person, but a ghost bride made of paper. The ghost bride's lips were painted a bright scarlet, two lines of red on her cheeks framing a deathly pale face, the smiling appearance extremely frightening.

"What kind of lousy tradition is this, is money burning a hole in this town's pocket or what," Mo Ran muttered under his breath.

Chu Wanning said, "The people of Butterfly Town are extremely superstitious, it is their belief that solitary graves will attract lone souls and stray spirits, bringing misfortune to the family."

"...That's not actually a thing right?"

"It is real as long as the townsfolk believe it to be."

Mo Ran sighed. "I guess. Butterfly Town's been around for hundreds of years already, if one were to now tell them that their superstitions don't actually

exist, they probably wouldn't be able to accept it."

Shi Mei asked in a quiet voice, "Where is the ghost marriage procession going?"

Chu Wanning said, "We passed a temple earlier. The one enshrined inside was not a god, and there was a Xi^[2] character posted on the door. The altar was piled with red satin written with 'match made in heaven', 'harmony in the afterlife' and the like. I believe that's probably their destination."

"I also noticed that temple." Shi Mei looked pensive. "Shizun, is the one enshrined within a ghost mistress of ceremonies?"

"That is correct."

The ghost mistress of ceremonies was a ghost personage born of the imagination of the common people. They believed that marriage between the souls of the departed also needed to go through the proper customs and be witnessed by a mistress of ceremonies, to certify that the pair of deceased had become husband and wife. Since ghost marriage was a common tradition at Butterfly Town, it followed that they would make a golden body for the ghost mistress of ceremonies to be enshrined before the cemetery outside town. The families holding ghost marriages would stop by with the ghost bride to worship at the temple before the burial.

Mo Ran had rarely seen such ridiculous happenings before, and watched with great interest. But Chu Wanning only gave a brief, detached glance before turning his horse around. "Let's go, we must check on the family that's being haunted."

"Three honored Daozhang^[3], I've suffered so much! You've finally come! If someone hadn't come to take care of this soon, I-I wouldn't even want to live anymore!"

The client who had requested Sisheng Peak to come and perform the exorcism was the richest merchant in the town, Landlord Chen.

The Chen family dealt in perfumed powder and had four sons and a daughter. After the eldest son's marriage, he and his wife had sought to move out, as his wife disliked the noise in the family. The Chen family had riches and reputation to spare, so they'd purchased a large plot of land at a secluded area by the northern mountain; it even had a natural hot spring pond, quite a nice spot.

But the day they began building there, they had only gotten a couple shovels into it before hitting something hard. The wife had moved over to take a look only to immediately swoon from fright—they had somehow dug up a brand-new, red-painted coffin at the northern mountain!

Butterfly Town had a designated burial grounds, all the deceased were buried there, but this solitary coffin had inexplicably shown up at the northern mountain. Not only that, there was no grave or marker, and the entire coffin had been painted blood red.

Of course they didn't dare proceed any further, and hurriedly covered it back up. But it was already too late. Ever since that day, strange things kept happening to the Chens.

"First it was that daughter-in-law of mine," Landlord Chen lamented. "The fright affected her baby and she miscarried. Then it was my eldest son; he went into the mountain to collect medicinal herbs to help his wife recover, but slipped and fell, and by the time we found him, he was already dead...Hai!" He let out a long sigh and waved his hand, too choked up to continue.

Madam Chen dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief. "My husband is right, in the months after that, our sons met with mishaps, one after another. If not disappearance, then death——of our four sons, three are already gone!"

Chu Wanning's brows were furrowed as he glanced past the Chen couple, gaze landing on the pale-faced youngest son. He looked to be about the same age as Mo Ran, fifteen or sixteen, and had delicate features, but they were now twisted with fear.

Shi Mei said, "Would you mind telling us how the other sons...how they died?"

Madam Chen sighed. "Our second son went to look for his brother and was bitten by a snake on the way. It was just a regular grass snake, not poisonous, so no one paid it any mind at the time, but a couple days later he just fell over while eating, and then....." She let out a sob. "My son....."

Shi Mei exhaled, feeling terrible for having to push. "Then, were there signs of poisoning on the body?"

"Ha, what poison, our family's definitely been cursed! The older sons are all dead, the youngest is next! The youngest son is next!"

Chu Wanning frowned, gaze moving to Madam Chen with lightning speed. "How do you know that the youngest son is next, and not yourself? Does this malicious spirit only kill men?"

The youngest son of the Chen family cowered to the side, legs shaking and eyes swollen like peaches. Even his voice squeaked and contorted as he said, "It's me! It's going to be me! I know it! The person in the red coffin is coming! He's coming! Daozhang, Daozhang save me! Daozhang save me!"

He began to lose it as he spoke, scrambling over to try and hug Chu Wanning's thigh.

Chu Wanning had always been averse to physical contact with strangers and immediately sidestepped it. He lifted his head to stare at the Chen couple. "What exactly is this all about?"

The couple exchanged a glance and spoke with a trembling voice: "There's a place in this house, we, we're afraid to go near it again——Daozhang will understand when he sees, it's truly evil, truly..."

Chu Wanning interrupted them, "What place?"

They hesitated for a moment, then pointed toward the ancestral shrine room with trembling hands. "There..."

Chu Wanning led the way, followed closely by Mo Ran and Shi Mei. The Chen family trailed after at a distance.

Pushing open the door, the inside looked no different from the ancestral shrines of other big families, with rows of memorial tablets flanked on both sides by pale candle fire.

All the tablets in the room were painted yellow, with the names and positions of the departed engraved thereon.

The writing was neat and careful: Esteemed Spirit of So-and-So Ancestor, Esteemed Spirit of So-and-So Ancestor.

Except for a tablet right in the middle; the lettering on that one wasn't carved and painted, but written in a vivid red:

Spirit of Chen Yanji.

Erected by Living Person of the Chen-Sun Clan.

The Chen family, who had been hiding behind the Daozhang, peeked into the shrine room that was draped in fluttering white silks, perhaps hoping for a fluke. But the letters on the tablet were still there, as if written in blood, and they broke down immediately.

Madam Chen wailed loudly, and the youngest son's face was so pale he hardly even looked alive.

First, the lettering on this tablet did not conform to the traditional system of rites. Second, the writing was extremely messy, as if the person had been about to fall asleep and struggling to write, so much so that it was nearly illegible.

Shi Mei turned his head and asked, "Who is Chen Yanji?"

The youngest son, voice shaking with sobs, answered from behind him, "I-it's me."

Landlord Chen wept as he spoke. "Daozhang, it's like this. Ever since our second son passed, we noticed that... that a new tablet had been added to the ancestral shrine, but that the names written on it were those of living people from our family. Once a name appears, that person will definitely meet with disaster within seven days! When our third son's name appeared on the tablet, I shut him in his room and sprinkled incense dust by the door, and even got someone to come perform thaumaturgy. We tried everything, but— on the seventh day! He still died...no cause whatsoever, just died!"

He became more emotional and more afraid the more he spoke, even dropping to his knees as well. "I've never committed any wrongdoings in my life, why must the Heavens treat me so! Why!"

Shi Mei's heart ached for him, and he hurriedly went to comfort the old man who was crying to the heavens. He looked up and called softly, "Shizun, this....."

Chu Wanning hadn't even turned around. He was still staring at that tablet with great interest, as if flowers were about to bloom from it.

Suddenly, Chu Wanning asked, "Living person, Chen-Sun clan, is that referring to you, Madam Chen?"

Author's Notes:

Once upon a time there was a cold blooded demon Shizun, the demon Shizun had three disciples. They all had very Mary Sue titles. The Phoenix of Bashu Xue Ziming, The Restored Soul of the Corporeal Dragon Mo Weiyu, and The Dormant White Tiger Shi Mingjing.

The above titles are all bogus.

They should actually be: Bird thing Xue MengMeng, dog thing Mo Feed Fish (pun on Weiyu), and white lotus shimei. Shrugs :-D

Ch.11 This Venerable One Is Gonna Smooch, Rejoice!

"Y-yes, it's me!" Madam Chen wept. "But I didn't write on the tablet! Why would I curse my own child? I——"

"Indeed you would not have done it while awake, but that's not necessarily true when asleep."

Chu Wanning lifted his hand to pick up the memorial tablet as he spoke, channeling spiritual energy into his palm. Suddenly, blood-curdling screams erupted from the tablet, followed immediately by the heavy, festering scent of the blood trickling forth from it.

Chu Wanning's eyes were cold and piercing, voice stern as he said, "Arrogant wicked spirit, daring to run thus rampant!"

Against the heavy spiritual power gathered in his palm, the writing on the tablet was actually forced to recede bit by bit, screaming. It soon became faded, and finally, vanished altogether. Chu Wanning squeezed with his pale, slender fingers, and the entire memorial tablet shattered!!

The Chen family, watching from the back, was stunned. Even Shi Mei was stunned.

He couldn't help exhaling, "How impressive."

Mo Ran also couldn't help internally exhaling, how vicious.

Chu Wanning's face turned slightly in their direction. His elegant features were devoid of expression, but there were a few specks of blood that had splattered on his cheek. He lifted his hand to examine the blood on his fingertips before speaking to the Chen family. "All of you stay in the courtyard today, do not go anywhere."

Of course none of them dared to do anything but comply after that display, and promptly answered, "Yes! Yes! We'll obey Daozhang's every instruction!"

Chu Wanning strode out of the shrine room, wiping the bloodstains off of his face indifferently. He lifted a finger to point at Madam Chen. "Especially you. Do not fall asleep under any circumstance. That thing is capable of possession, you must remain awake no matter how drowsy."

"Yes...yes yes yes!" Madam Chen agreed repeatedly, then asked tearily, with a measure of hesitation, "Daozhang, then, my son...is...is he safe?"

"For now."

Madam Chen stared blankly. "For now? Not always? Th-then what must be done to keep my son safe?"

Chu Wanning said, "Capture the demon."

In her panicked worry, Madam Chen forgot her manners and threw courtesy aside to ask urgently, "And just when is Daozhang planning to go capture it?"

"Right now."

Chu Wanning's gaze swept over the Chen family. "Which of you knows the exact place that the red coffin was dug up from? Lead the way."

The surname of the eldest son's wife was Yao. Despite being a woman, she was tall and gallant. Her face showed dread as well, but she was relatively calm compared to the others, and immediately offered, "I know the location, since that place was selected by my late husband and myself. I will guide Daozhang."

The three of them followed Chen-Yao, heading northward the entire way, and quickly arrived at the plot of land purchased by the Chens.

The area was already cordoned off. The plants were dark and overgrown, and there was nobody around for miles. It was completely silent, with not even the sounds of birds and insects present.

Halfway up the mountain, the space suddenly opened up into a clearing. Chen-Yao said, "Three honored Daozhang, this is the place."

There was a grave-suppression rock on top of where the red coffin had been dug up. Mo Ran burst out laughing at the sight of it. "What good is that crappy rock gonna do? Clearly the work of amateurs, toss it aside."

Chen-Yao was apprehensive. "But the Mister from the town said that the demonic beast inside holds the evil spirit down to keep it from getting out."

Mo Ran smiled sarcastically. "That Mister sure has been effective so far."

"....." Chen-Yao said, "Toss, toss toss!"

Chu Wanning said coldly, "No need." He lifted his hand, fingertips glowing golden as Tianwen answered the call. A single flick of the willow vine, and the rock was cracked into pieces! Expressionless, Chu Wanning walked over to stand among the debris, and raised his hand once again in a threat. "What are you hiding for? Get the hell up!"

A strange '*geh geh*' sound came from below. Suddenly, a twelve feet tall wooden coffin burst forth from the ground, spraying earth everywhere, sending dust flying.

Startled, Shi Mei said, "This coffin has such heavy demonic energy!"

Chu Wanning said, "Fall back."

Tianwen struck the tightly sealed red coffin in a backhanded lashing, sending sparks flying. There was a moment of silence, then the lid of the coffin split open, and the object inside was revealed as the thick smoke dispersed.

Inside the coffin was a man, completely naked. He had a straight nose and handsome features, and would have looked as if he was merely asleep, if not for the paper-pale whiteness of his skin.

Mo Ran's gaze zoomed below the man's waist, then he made a show of covering his eyes. "Aiya, the stinky jackass isn't wearing any pants."

Shi Mei: "....."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Chen-Yao called out in surprise, "Husband!" She made to rush toward the coffin without a second thought. Chu Wanning reached out to hold her back, asking with a raised eyebrow, "This is your husband?"

"Yes! He's my husband!" Chen-Yao was stricken with both fear and grief. "How did he end up here? We definitely interred him at the ancestral grave, fully dressed in burial clothes, how did he..."

She started wailing before she could finish, beating her chest in anguish. "How could this happen! So wretched—so wretched! My husband...my husband!!"

Shi Mei sighed. "Mistress Chen, please restrain your grief."

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran both ignored the weeping woman; Chu Wanning didn't know how to comfort people, and Mo Ran had no compassion to speak of. The two of them stared at the corpse in the coffin.

Mo Ran had already gone through this in the previous lifetime and so knew more or less what was coming. But he still had to act his part, so he noted, stroking his chin, "Shizun, something's fishy about this corpse."

Chu Wanning: "I know."

"....."

Mo Ran originally had an entire speech planned out, ripped directly from Chu Wanning's original explanation and analysis from the previous lifetime. He'd wanted to take it out this lifetime and give Chu Wanning a shock, but who would've thought that he'd just casually throw out an "I know".

As a teacher, wasn't he supposed to encourage his disciples to speak their own thoughts, and give praise and reward for doing so??

Mo Ran wasn't giving up. He pretended not to have heard the "I know", and kept going. "There's no sign of decomposition on this corpse. Chen-gongzi died over half a month ago; in this kind of environment, he should've long since started festering and leaking pus, and there should already be a layer of corpse fluid accumulated in the coffin. This is the first point."

Chu Wanning shot a cold 'you may continue' kind of look at him: "....."

"Second." Mo Ran was unaffected, and continued to recite Chu Wanning's explanation from the previous lifetime. "The demonic energy coming off this red coffin was very strong before it opened, but conversely vanished after opening. Moreover, there is practically no demonic energy on the corpse itself, which is also quite abnormal."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"Third, have you noticed that, ever since the moment the coffin was opened, there has been a sweet fragrance in the wind?"

The scent was very subdued, one would not have noticed it at all without paying careful attention. At Mo Ran's words, Shi Mei and Chen-Yao realized that there was indeed a faint sweet smell in the air.

Shi Mei said, "You're right."

Chen-Yao sniffed, her face changing color. "This fragrance....."

Shi Mei asked, "Mistress Chen, what is it?"

Chen-Yao was so scared that even her voice changed tone. "This fragrance is my mother-in-law's secret recipe, Hundred Butterfly Fragrance!"

No one spoke for a moment. That line written on the memorial tablet in the shrine room, "Erected by Living Person of the Chen-Sun Clan", seemed to appear before their eyes.

Shi Mei spoke, "...Could it be that this whole thing really is Madam Chen's doing?"

Mo Ran said, "It's unlikely."

Chu Wanning said, "It is not."

The two spoke at nearly the same time, then looked at each other. Chu Wanning's expression remained even. "You go ahead."

Mo Ran spoke without modesty. "As far as I know, the Chen family made their fortune on the Madam's unique Hundred Butterfly Fragrance. Its recipe is

kept secret, but the finished product is not hard to obtain. Of every ten girls in Butterfly Town, five or six wear this fragrance. In addition, we looked into this beforehand, and it seems that Chen-gongzi also quite liked his mother's Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, and often mixed it into his bathwater when bathing, so it's not at all strange that his body carries this scent. What is strange is that..."

He turned his head back toward the naked man in the coffin as he spoke.

"He's already been dead for half a month, but this fragrance is fresh as if it's been freshly applied. Am I right, Shizun?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

"Could you just praise me a little if I'm right~"

Chu Wanning: "Mm."

Mo Ran laughed. "You really don't like to waste words."

He'd hardly gotten two chuckles in before it was lost in a flurry of robes, billowing as Chu Wanning grabbed him and swiftly moved them back several feet. In his hand, Tianwen glowed brightly golden, fire light dancing.

"Look out."

The smell of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance in the air suddenly thickened, a white fog materializing as the scent filled the air, spreading with alarming speed. The entire area became a sea of fog almost instantly, so dense that one could not even see the fingers on their own hand!

Mo Ran's heart stirred.

The illusory realm was opening.

"Ah!!" Chen-Yao's shriek was the first thing to be heard in the thick fog.
"Daozhang hel——"

She did not get to finish speaking before the sound was suddenly cut off.

Chu Wanning's fingertip glowed blue as he placed a tracking enchantment on Mo Ran's forehead. "You be careful while I go check out the situation."

Then he quickly disappeared into the thick fog, following the direction of the voice.

Mo Ran touched his forehead, laughing in a low voice. "Well well, even the position of the enchantment is exactly the same as in the last lifetime. Chu Wanning, you really haven't changed at all."

The fog had come fast but it dispersed just as quickly, and was completely gone before long. The scene that revealed itself before him, however, was even more startling than the fog was. At least, Mo Ran had gotten quite the scare out of it in the last lifetime.

When the fog disappeared, the desolate and overgrown mountain was gone.

In its place was a vast expanse of intricate and elegant landscape gardens, pavilions and winding verandas, rock gardens and verdant trees, with a cobblestone path stretching beyond what the eye could see.

The mere sight of this place made Mo Ran want to roll on the floor in joy.

This tyrannical jackass had been thinking about this very illusory realm the entire day. In the previous life, they'd all become separated here as well; Mo Ran had run into Shi Mei first, and under the hypnosis of the illusion, had kissed him for the first—and only—time in his life.

Unfortunately, that time, Shi Mei had run away as soon as Mo Ran had let go, perhaps out of fright. The sweet nectar had been taken away before he'd barely even got a taste of it, and he was left unsatisfied.

Later, after the illusory realm had been broken, Shi Mei hadn't even fussed over this matter with him. It was as if the kiss had never even happened, and neither of them had ever brought it up again. Sometimes, in the middle of the night, Mo Ran had wondered if it had just been a fantasy born of his deep obsession.

Fantasy or not, Mo Ran thought as he licked his lips, Shi Mei is not getting away that easily this time! I'm gonna get my fill of smooches all at once!

Author's Notes:

According to historical facts, courtesy names are received at age 20. However, In this cultivation world, one debuts and receives their courtesy name at age 15. I personally really like the three characters in Mo Weiyu (墨微雨), they look more beautiful than Mo Ran (墨燃). So I wanted to present them sooner, hahahaha.

Ch.12 This Venerable One Kissed the Wrong Person... WTF...

>>heads up moron kisses like a dog and doesn't ask permission before his paws wander

Even after having walked around for quite a while, he still couldn't tell which direction was which.

But the scent of the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance in the air was becoming stronger. This scent caused those exposed to it for too long to have heightened emotions and enhanced senses, and induced them to do all manners of unreasonable things.

Mo Ran gradually grew increasingly agitated and restless. It was as if a flame had been lit in his stomach and was slowly boiling the blood coursing through his body.

Water, he needed to find some water. Where was that spring again?

He knew there was a spring in the illusory realm. He was already parched and dizzy by the time he'd found it in his last life, and, having no other choice, had scooped and drunk several handfuls of the water, thinking that death by poison was still preferable to death by thirst.

He'd felt his consciousness becoming blurrier and blurrier after drinking the spring water. He'd been fading in and out of consciousness by the time Shi Mei found him; Shi Mei cultivated the healing arts and had promptly set about dispelling the poison in his body. And he, dizzy and addled, and under the poison's influence at that time, had kissed Shi Mei on the lips as if possessed.

The ex-emperor of the human world was swift as the wind and forceful like thunder, and desperately wanted a repeat of his dream-like encounter with the

person of his desires. He wandered around the illusory realm for a long while before finally hearing the tinkling of spring water. Overjoyed, he dashed over and drank to his heart's content without hesitation.

As expected, the spring water exacerbated the fretful agitation brought about by the scent even more. He uncontrollably wanted nothing more than to go deeper into the spring, and half his body was already submerged before he knew it.

And just like in the last lifetime, as Mo Ran was about to lose consciousness, a hand suddenly pulled him up, sending water flying everywhere. Air rushed back into his nose and Mo Ran gasped, eyelashes dangling with water droplets fluttering open to look at the figure in front of him.

The figure slowly came into focus, accompanied by a voice that sounded almost angry.

“What’s wrong with you, drinking the water here, are you trying to die?”

Mo Ran shook the water off like a wet dog and breathed in relief when he confirmed who it was. “Shi Mei...”

“Stop talking and take this medicine!”

Mo Ran opened his mouth and obediently swallowed the purple pill, eyes staring at Shi Mei’s incomparably beautiful face the whole time.

Suddenly, just like in the last lifetime, the intense feelings of agitation made him lose all restraint—not that he was any kind of an honorable man to begin with—and he captured Shi Mei’s wrist, quickly pressing their lips together before the other could react.

Instantly, sparks flew everywhere and his mind went totally blank.

He was a man with a sordid history of promiscuity, but passion between the sheets needed no contact between the lips, no unnecessary affections. Hence, his carnal entanglements were many, but his kisses pitifully few.

Shi Mei hadn’t expected to be attacked like this at all, and froze in shock until a tongue intruded inside, and only then did he finally react and start struggling.

“What are you do-...mmf!” He only managed half a sentence before his face was turned back roughly and his lips covered once again. Mo Ran kissed more intensely than he had in the previous life. The two tangled into a heap by the side of the spring, Mo Ran keeping Shi Mei pressed firmly under his body as he kissed those moist, somewhat chilly lips, the touch breathtaking just like how he remembered it, and his cheek, and his ear...

“Stop moving...” The huskiness of his voice surprised even himself.
Fuck.

The spring water’s effect seemed somehow more intense than in the last life?

The way things had gone in the previous lifetime, he hadn’t actually got to embrace Shi Mei for that long. Back then, the young Mo Ran had been stricken by his conscience after getting only a few pecks in; his grip had loosened and Shi Mei had immediately gotten up and fled by treading across the water with qinggong^[4].

But he was vile and shameless in this lifetime, with no conscience to strike him, only desire to urge him on. He kissed as much as he pleased, holding the other person down by the side of the spring.

Beneath him, Shi Mei struggled and cried out in anger, but his heart was already possessed, and he couldn't make out what the other was saying at all. He could only see that beautiful face swaying back and forth in his vision, that pair of moist, alluring lips opening and closing.

It felt as if a ball of fire had been ignited in his abdomen. Mo Ran gave in to his desires, his kisses growing increasingly more ravenous as he pried open the other's jaw and pushed his tongue in, plundering the sweetness inside.

His heart thudded like drumbeats in his chest.

Amidst the chaos, he had already ripped off Shi Mei's intricate outer robe and torn open his belt sash. His hand slid inside and caressed smooth, firm skin. The person underneath him jumped at the touch, but was again pressed back down by Mo Ran.

He bit at Shi Mei's ear, whispering, "Be obedient, it'll be good for both of us."

"Mo Weiyu——!!"

"Aiya aiya, are you that mad, to call me like a stranger?" Mo Ran smiled as he licked the other man's earlobe, hand not remaining idle either, groping directly toward his waist.

Shitty jackass Mo Ran, the sixteen year old budding jackass of that time indeed couldn't compare to the thirty two year old veteran jackass of the present! This person's face grew thicker with each passing day!

Shi Mei's entire body was tense, and Mo Ran could feel him trembling slightly. Really, he looked like such a slender person, but the contours of his body were surprisingly toned under his hand.

His desires ran even more rampant, restraint slipping further as he pulled at the other's inner robes.

Shi Mei finally hit the limits of his endurance.
"Mo Weiyu! You're seeking death!!"

There was a loud bang, and a burst of powerful spiritual energy suddenly tossed him aside! Its power was ferocious, and Mo Ran got caught completely off guard. His entire body flipped over and slammed against a rock at the spring side, and he nearly spit out blood.

Shi Mei clutched at his disheveled clothing as he stood up, flustered. Golden spiritual energy crackled in a frenzy at his palm, sparks flying audibly, mirroring the fury in his eyes.

Mo Ran was dizzy from the impact, but still felt vaguely that something was wrong.

"Tianwen, come!"

Following the enraged bellow, a golden willow vine appeared in Shi Mei's hand as Tianwen answered the call. The willow vine glowed piercingly bright, streaks of fire and bursts of gold coursing along its length, willow leaves swirling in the air.

Mo Ran was stunned.
When did Shi Mei learn how to summon Tianwen?

The thought hadn't even settled in his mind before Tianwen ripped through the air toward him viciously! There was no restraint whatsoever behind the lashing, and the blood of the despicable scoundrel Taxian-Jun was spilt without mercy. If anyone like Rong Jiu who had suffered at Mo Ran's hands were to see

this scene, they would surely clap and cheer, "Nice one! Awesome! Do it again! Vanquish the evil! What a good deed!"

Mo Ran finally sobered up under this relentless storm of brutal lashings.

Shi Mei is so gentle, how could this be him?
To be this practiced at whipping people, who else could it be but Chu Wanning!!!!

Chu Wanning's hand got tired from whipping, and only then did he pause to take a breath, rubbing his wrist. He was just about to continue when Mo Ran, leaning against the rock, suddenly coughed up a big mouthful of blood

"...No more, I'll really die..."

Mo Ran coughed up more blood and felt his heart sink to the depths of the abyss. That was definitely the best, the most remarkable, the highlight of his history of debauchery.

Why the fuck was it Chu Wanning who'd come?
What's more, Chu Wanning had Shi Mei's face for some reason, and even his voice sounded exactly the same!

He wiped the blood from the corners of his mouth and looked up, panting.
Perhaps it was due to the beating, or perhaps it was because the medicine Chu Wanning had given him earlier was finally starting to work, but when he raised his head this time, the person before him was no longer Shi Mei.

Chu Wanning seethed from where he stood under the tree, face gloomy as he glared at Mo Ran with eyes like twin bolts of lightning.

This vicious and enraged look of his really was frightening.

But...

Mo Ran stared for a few seconds.

And noticed that he...had grown shamelessly hard.

Chu Wanning always dressed immaculately, with not a hair out of place, but his intricate white robes, usually worn with the collars high and tightly closed, were now a disheveled mess held up only by the tight grip of his pale, slender hand. His lips were red and swollen from kisses, and love bites peppered the side of his neck. His expression was fierce, but that only added to the allure.

All those memories of Chu Wanning from the previous life, the insanity, the bloodlust, the hatred, the rampage, the conquest, the pleasure, all the memories that had piled up.

Mo Ran didn't want to think about it, hadn't planned on remembering any of it, but in this air, of the rusty tang of blood mixed with Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, the memories would not be subdued.

It swelled like the tide and flooded his thoughts.

Fuck, he absolutely cannot see Chu Wanning looking like this, after all.

Even if he loathed him, hated him, so much so that he wanted to chop him up and make him into wontons and eat him, Mo Ran still had to admit.

In the previous life, his most fervent entanglements, his most intense climaxes, all of it had been gotten off of Chu Wanning's body.

Hating him was one thing.

But as a man, especially a vulgar, shameless man like Mo Ran, the body's instinctive reaction was another matter altogether.

Chu Wanning let out a breath. He seemed truly furious, the hand holding Tianwen trembling slightly.

“Awake now?”

Mo Ran forced down a mouthful of blood: “...Yes, Shizun.”

Chu Wanning seemed like he wasn’t done with the beating yet, but he recognized that Mo Ran was under the influence of the illusion and shouldn’t be blamed for all of it. He hesitated for a moment, but put the willow vine away in the end.

“What happened today...”

Mo Ran rushed to speak before he finished. “No one will know besides you and I! I absolutely won’t say anything! Let the heavens strike me with lightning if I speak a word of it!”

Chu Wanning was quiet for a moment, then smiled grimly. “I’ve heard that swear of yours no fewer than a hundred times, and not a single time was serious.”

“It’s definitely serious this time!” Sure, his body had a reaction, but as far as Mo Ran was concerned, wanting to fuck Chu Wanning was like wanting to eat stinky tofu, neither should be brandished in public.

Just eat your stinky tofu in a corner away from others so they don’t have to smell it. Wanting to bed Chu Wanning was the same.

Mo Ran had always loathed Chu Wanning. How could he let anyone know that he loathed him on one hand, but secretly wanted to fuck him on the other? What kinda disease was that?

And last life’s sordid business with Chu Wanning? Spare him, he really didn’t want to even mention it.

“This illusion’s influence is strong, whoever you meet inside takes on the appearance of the person your heart most wants to see.”

Chu Wanning explained as he walked alongside Mo Ran.

“You must remain calm and focused to avoid its influence.”

“Oh...”

Huh? Wait a second!

Mo Ran suddenly thought of something, and quivered.

If it was like that, then the Shi Mei that he’d met in the illusory realm last life also might not have been Shi Mei? What if that had also been—

He snuck a sideways glance at Chu Wanning, and shivered again.

No way!

If that had been Chu Wanning he’d kissed in the last lifetime, he definitely would’ve gotten a good old round of whipping! Or a slap at the very very least!

It couldn’t have been Chu Wanning! Definitely not!

As he was busy having an intense internal debate, Chu Wanning suddenly stopped and pulled Mo Ran behind him. “Quiet.”

“What is it?”

“There’s movement ahead.”

Things had turned out completely different from the events of the previous life, so Mo Ran didn't know what to expect anymore. At Chu Wanning's words, he asked immediately, "Maybe it's Shi Mei?"

Chu Wanning frowned. "While in this illusory realm, you absolutely must not imagine who you might meet ahead, or else whoever or whatever you meet will take on that person's appearance. Remove distractions, focus your thoughts."

"....." Mo Ran tried, but couldn't do it.

Chu Wanning glanced at him. A dagger of concentrated spiritual energy formed in his hand, and jabbed unceremoniously into Mo Ran's arm.

"Ah——!"

"Don't yell." Chu Wanning had anticipated this; his other hand was already touching Mo Ran's lips with a golden light, and Mo Ran suddenly couldn't make a sound. "Does it hurt?"

"....." What do you think! Why don't you stab yourself too and see if it hurts! Mo Ran nodded pitifully, eyes watering.

"Good. Focus on the pain and don't think about anything else. Follow behind me, let's go take a look."

Mo Ran silently cursed Chu Wanning as he followed quietly behind him on the winding path. Unexpectedly, the sounds of chatter and laughter could be heard as they got closer, truly suspicious in such a desolate place.

After going around a tall, continuous wall, the two finally arrived at the place the voices were coming from——

It was a manor draped in vibrant colors, brightly lit, red silks swaying gently. There were well over a hundred banquet tables in the large courtyard, holding all manners of exquisite dishes. The place was bustling with activity, guests drinking and making merry.

Past the open gates of the main hall was a massive, eye-catching Xi^[5] character in bright scarlet; it seemed to be a wedding banquet by all appearances.

"Shizun..." Mo Ran whispered. "Look at these people...they don't have faces!"

Author's Notes:

This dead dog has a question. In Mo Ran's past life, who exactly did he smooch?

Ch.13 This Venerable One's Bride

Of course Chu Wanning had already noticed that without Mo Ran's comment.

The guests chattered cheerfully, but there was no way to tell where the voices came from. The people sitting, standing, playing party games or making toasts, every single one of them had a completely blank face, as if made of paper.

"What should we do? Don't tell me we should go in there and drink with them?"

Chu Wanning did not laugh at Mo Ran's bad attempt at a joke, and focused instead on the matter at hand, head lowered as he thought.

Suddenly, scattered footsteps came from a distance away, and two long lines of people appeared out of the fog, moving in procession and heading slowly toward the manor.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran moved reflexively to hide behind a large rock in the garden. The lines approached, led by a smiling golden boy and jade maiden^[6] with clear and colorful facial features; in the dim light of the night, they looked just like the little boy and girl paper dolls that were burned for the dead.

They each held a red candle; the candles were as thick as their arms and decorated with a dragon and a phoenix intertwining, and gave off a strong scent of Butterfly Town's powder as they burned. Mo Ran nearly lost his senses to the smell again, but thankfully the dull ache from the wound on his hand where Chu Wanning had stabbed him earlier kept him grounded. He jabbed at the injury again for good measure.

Chu Wanning glanced at him.

Mo Ran: "...ahem, this is pretty effective."

He paused, then asked, "Shizun, how come you don't need to poke a hole in yourself to maintain your consciousness?"

Chu Wanning: "The scent has no effect on me."

"Ah? Why not?"

Chu Wanning, with an air of frost, "My cultivation base is strong."

Mo Ran: "....."

Led by the golden boy and jade maiden, the twin lines walked slowly up a flight of steps. Chu Wanning watched them for a while before quietly uttering a "Hm?"

He was rarely ever surprised; Mo Ran followed his gaze curiously, and was shocked as well.

The lines were made up of corpses. They retained their facial features from life, but their eyes were closed and their skin was deathly pale, and they swayed as they walked. Most of them were fairly young, likely below twenty, both male and female, and a silhouette among them looked especially familiar——

The eldest Chen-gongzi, who had been in the coffin earlier, had somehow appeared in this procession, and was walking slowly behind the strange scent of the candles with his eyes closed. All of the others in the lines were paired up, only he was different—there wasn't a person beside him, but a ghost bride made of paper instead.

As if Chen-gongzi wasn't enough, when the procession advanced further and they saw the people at the very end of the lines, color instantly drained from Mo Ran's face.

Shi Mei and Chen-Yao followed behind the lines of corpses with their heads hung low. Their eyes were also closed, faces pale, walking in the exact same manner as the corpses before them, and it was impossible to tell if they were still alive or not.

Mo Ran was about to lose his mind. He leapt up and tried to rush forward immediately, but was stopped by Chu Wanning's grip on his shoulder. "Wait."

"But Shi Mei——!!"

"I know." Chu Wanning watched the lines slowly advance, and whispered, "Don't be hasty. Look over there, there's an enforced barrier in place. If you rush over, it will start wailing, and things will be out of our hands if all the faceless ghosts in the courtyard attack at once."

Chu Wanning was a master in barriers; his barriers were formidable, and his eyes were sharp. Mo Ran looked over, and saw that there was indeed a nearly transparent veil at the entrance to the courtyard.

When the golden boy and jade maiden arrived before the courtyard, they blew softly at the candles they were holding to make the flames burn even higher, then slowly stepped through the barrier and into the yard.

Behind them, one by one, the men and women followed them through the barrier without any interference. The faceless people drinking inside the courtyard turned to watch them enter, and began to cheer and clap.

Chu Wanning spoke, "Go, follow behind them. Close your eyes and don't breathe when you cross the barrier. Copy what the corpses do no matter what happens, and absolutely do not speak."

Mo Ran was anxious to save Shi Mei and didn't need him to say any more. The two slipped into the group of corpses.

Each line had the same number of corpses. Chu Wanning took his place behind Shi Mei, so Mo Ran could only line up behind Chen-Yao. The procession moved at an agonizingly slow pace. Mo Ran kept looking over at Shi Mei, but could only see the side of his pale face and a bit of snow-white neck drooping helplessly.

Finally reaching the barrier at last, they both held their breath and passed through without incident. The courtyard was even bigger from the inside than it looked from the outside. Aside from the three-storey manor decorated with lanterns and colored banners, the sides of the courtyard were also densely packed with at least a hundred small side rooms, each with a large scarlet Xi character on the window and a red lantern hanging by the door.

The faceless guests suddenly all stood up at once to the sound of firecrackers and shawms.

A faceless ceremony official stood before the manor, announcing with vacillating intonation, "The auspicious hour is upon us, the grooms and brides have arrived——"

Mo Ran was astounded, wha? These lines of corpses are grooms and brides?

He hurriedly looked to Chu Wanning for help, but the Beidou Immortal's brows were tightly furrowed, lost in his own thoughts, and he didn't even spare Mo Ran a glance.

...Mo Ran thought to himself that his uncle's efforts were truly misdirected; going down the mountain to gain practical experience with this kind of teacher was doing more harm to his pride than not bringing the teacher along at all would have.

Suddenly a group of giggling children darted into the yard, dressed in bright red but with their hair tied in white strings. They crowded around the two lines of people like so many little fish, each tugging a person toward one of the rooms on either side.

Mo Ran, at a complete loss, mouthed toward Chu Wanning: Shizun, what to do?

Chu Wanning shook his head and pointed toward the corpses in front that followed obediently behind the little boys and girls. His meaning was clear—go along with it.

Having no other options, Mo Ran could only stumble behind as a little boy with a topknot led him into one of the rooms. As soon as they entered, the boy waved his arm and the door slammed shut.

Mo Ran glared at the child, wary of what the faceless little ghost was going to do to him.

In the last lifetime, Chu Wanning had rescued Shi Mei and broken through the illusory realm all on his own. Mo Ran hadn't needed to do anything at all and the evil had already been vanquished. Afterwards, he'd been too busy dwelling on the sweet aftertaste of Shi Mei's lips to even pay attention to Chu Wanning's explanation.

That's why, with the situation having turned out differently, he had no idea what to expect next, and could only brace himself for whatever might come.

There was a dressing table in the room with a copper mirror, and a set of intricately embroidered black and red wedding clothes hanging neatly on a rack.

The child patted the bench, gesturing for Mo Ran to go sit.

Mo Ran observed that the ghosts here weren't too clever. Rather dumb, actually. As long as he didn't speak, they couldn't even tell the living from the dead. So he sat before the dressing table as directed, and the child toddled over to help him wash and change...

Suddenly, a haitang blossom^[7] floated in from the window and gently landed on the water inside the wash basin.

Mo Ran's eyes brightened. That haitang was also known as Yuheng of the Night Sky, used specifically by Chu Wanning for silent communication.

He scooped the flower out of the water, the haitang blossoming and unfurling instantly in his palm to reveal a speck of mellow golden light in its center.

He picked up the speck of light between his fingertips and placed it in his ear. Chu Wanning's voice came from inside.

"Mo Ran, I used Tianwen to confirm that this illusory realm was indeed set by Butterfly Town's ghost mistress of ceremonies. It's managed to cultivate into an actual deity due to receiving the villagers' incense and worship for hundreds of years. Every ghost marriage makes it more powerful, so it delights in presiding over these ceremonies. The corpses in the lines are likely Butterfly Town's ghost couples from these past couple hundreds of years whose weddings it witnessed. It likes the merriment, so it calls the corpses back into the illusory realm every night to do it all over again, growing stronger each time."

Mo Ran thought—what a deviant!!

If other deities got bored, they might at most play matchmaker with young men and women. But this ghost mistress of ceremonies sure was something

else; it might have the body of a deity, but it must have forgotten to grow a head, to have this kind of hobby, playing matchmaker with corpses, and not even just once, but to summon them from their graves every night to do it over and over and over again.

Are corpse orgies that riveting?
This spinster deity, what a damn headcase.

Chu Wanning: "Its real body is not here. Don't act carelessly, just follow the golden boy and jade maiden later, it will have to appear in person to absorb energy from the ghost weddings."

Mo Ran wanted to ask, what about Shi Mei? Is he ok?

"There is no need to worry about Shi Mei. He and Mistress Chen are both just temporarily unconscious due to the powder." Chu Wanning was very thorough, and had anticipated everything Mo Ran might ask. "Take care of yourself. I will handle everything."

The voice faded away after that.

At the same time, the child also finished fussing over Mo Ran's outfit. His reflection in the mirror was handsome; the corners of his lips curved naturally upwards, his facial features clear and bold. The collars of the fiery red wedding garment were neatly folded, and his long hair was done up with a white hairband, looking quite the part of the ghost groom.

The child made a gesture of invitation, and the tightly closed door creaked open.

A line of corpses dressed in wedding clothes stood in the corridor, male and female both. It looked like this ghost mistress of ceremonies and its mud head really didn't understand the way of things, it just grabbed any random pair to perform the wedding ceremony, not caring in the least if the couple was male and female, male and male, or female and female.

There was only one line of corpses in this corridor, the other line was across the courtyard on the other side, too far away to see if Chu Wanning and Shi Mei had come out yet.

The line moved slowly forward, and the ceremony official's voice could be heard now and again from the manor as the pairs completed the wedding ceremonies one by one.

Mo Ran looked at Chen-Yao standing in front of him, and felt that something wasn't quite right. He puzzled over it for a long while, the line growing shorter and shorter the whole time, and when only the last few pairs were left, this dumb scoundrel *finally* figured it out—

Ah! With the lines ordered like this, didn't that mean the woman in front of him was gonna get married with Shi Mei? And wouldn't he himself get matched with that wretch Chu Wanning? That wasn't acceptable!

This ex-emperor of the human world immediately grew upset. Lips pulling downwards, he yanked Chen-Yao back unceremoniously and jumped the line to stand in front of her.

The child next to him was flabbergasted, but Mo Ran immediately lowered his head and made like a hanged ghost, drooping along with the other corpses. The golden boy and jade maiden's cultivation wasn't high; they were baffled for a bit but couldn't even figure out where the problem had happened, and so they ended up doing absolutely nothing about it, like a pair of dimwits.

Mo Ran was quite pleased with himself, and followed the line cheerfully as he waited to meet up with Shi Mei.

Concurrently.

Chu Wanning looked at Shi Mei standing in front of him. There was no way to tell what dangers might lie ahead.

He'd always had a sharp tongue but a soft heart; regardless of how much he might be resented for his harshness, in actuality, as long as he was here, he was not going to allow his disciples to be put in danger.

Thus, he also reached out and pulled the befuddled Shi Mei behind himself, switching their places.

It was his turn.

At the end of the corridor, an attendant stood holding a black and red tray, giggling as Chu Wanning approached, the tinkling of a young woman's voice coming from that face devoid of features.

"Congratulations my lady, felicitations my lady, first meeting yet as old friends, serenity until old age."

Chu Wanning's face darkened instantly.

L-lady...?? Do you not have eyes?

Taking another look at the ghost attendant's blank face, he restrained himself.

It, in fact, did not fucking have eyes.

The ghost attendant continued giggling as it lifted the red veil in the tray and covered Chu Wanning's face. Then its ice-cold hand reached over and gripped him lightly with a delicate laugh. "My lady, this way please."

Author's Notes:

Next chapter we enter the bridal chamber. If there is no bridal chamber I will livestream me eating turd. If you dare!

Let's answer yesterday's question 【Who did Mo Ran kiss in his past life?】

First, nothing changed on Chu Wanning's side. The order of actions is the same as the previous life. This means since he first saved Mo Ran in this life, and in the past life it was also in this sequence.

In Mo Ran's memory, his mentality was 【Defeating monsters depends on Shizun, flirting depends on yourself】. Chu Wanning had taken care of everything, and then came to look for him after saving Shi Mei.

If the two men's paths took a divergence here, then the following possibility is very high:

At that time, Chu Wanning actually searched for Mo Ran first. However, for some reason, he left under circumstances that Mo Ran was not aware of, and went to save Shi Mei instead.

Combined with the sequence of actions done by Chu Wanning in this life, then... it can only mean that the Mo Ran at that time, just like this time, mistook Chu Wanning as Shi Mei. After being kissed, Chu Wanning immediately broke free. Since he was easily embarrassed, he couldn't calm down right away. He decided to not show himself just yet, as Mo Ran was out of danger anyway, he

went to save Shi Mei instead. After this, he brought Shi Mei and met up with Mo Ran with feigned calmness. Since Mo Ran had all his attention on Shi Mei, he didn't notice the subtle unusual behaviour from Chu Wanning.

This also explains why after the illusory realm disappeared, Shi Mei acted like nothing had happened. Because to him, nothing really had happened...

So that year, the one who broke free from you was actually Shizun, Mo Ran you stupid top! Pitiful Shizun's first kiss in both lifetimes was stolen by you, while you thought the one you kissed was your Shi-Ge. Bye.jpg. Crying.

Ch.14 This Venerable One Gets Married

Chu Wanning could still see with the thin red veil hanging before his eyes, but the view was somewhat hazy. Face thus obscured, his expression was composed as he let the ghost attendant lead him to the reception pavilion.

When he looked up at the person standing there through the haze of red though, the temperature around Chu Wanning instantly dropped by several degrees.

Mo Ran was also stunned.

No but...shouldn't it have been Shi Mei?

A veil covered the face of the "bride", standing before him and attired in splendid red. He couldn't see the face behind the veil too clearly, but no matter how he looked at it, it was definitely Chu Wanning's handsome but icy face, currently glaring at him with an air of displeasure and full killing intent.

Mo Ran: "....."

He was stupefied at first, and then his expression began to grow increasingly complicated. All kinds of emotions flashed across his face before finally settling into a strange kind of silence as he stood face to face with Chu Wanning, both of them staring uneasily at each other.

It was then that the golden boy and jade maiden behind them giggled and clapped, and then started to sing.

"Water of the White Emperor^[8], waves sparkling and luminous;
Spirit amant birds greet, bearing blossoms between their beaks.
Within this coffin, two shall join;
Within this sanctuary, two shall lie.
Intent in life, revealed in death.
Henceforth two shall pass beneath the heavens;
Henceforth in death lone souls shall never part."

But, beneath the ghastly verse was an undercurrent of sadness and regret. If only he could speak, Mo Ran just wanted to say one thing.
——"Ugh."

But he couldn't speak.

There was a pair of paper dolls before the altar, one male, one female. They had no faces, but were lavishly and luxuriously dressed, probably to represent the parents of the ghost couples.

The ceremony official began to chant in a sonorous bellow, "The amorous new bride shies from words, glances tender from beneath lowered lashes, red silk shrouds a delicate smile, may the husband please lift the veil."

“.....” Mo Ran had originally been completely unwilling, but hearing these words, he nearly lost his mind trying to hold back his laughter.

Hahahaha, the amorous new bride shies from words, ahahahaha!

Chu Wanning’s face was ashen as he tried to suppress his anger, closing his eyes as if that could shut off his hearing too.

The ghost attendant giggled and handed Mo Ran a folding fan; the words for “fan” and “virtuous” were pronounced the same^[9], to indicate that this marriage was predestined by fate.

“Groom, please lift the veil.”

Mo Ran stifled his laughter and went along with it, using the fan to lift the silken veil hanging before Chu Wanning’s eyes. Even his eyelashes quivered with suppressed laughter as he peeked at the stirring expression on Chu Wanning’s face.

Seeming to have sensed his mocking gaze, Chu Wanning tried to endure it for a while, but ultimately failed. Fire and lightning danced in his eyes as they snapped open with a murderous aura.

But paired with the red veil clinging to his hair and the scarlet garment adorning his body, although he looked no less fierce, the slight hint of red at the corners of his eyes from the anger and grievance unexpectedly painted quite a uniquely enticing picture.

Looking at eyes like these, Mo Ran startled involuntarily, smile freezing on his face. The Shizun before him suddenly looked just like he had at a certain moment in the past life. The two overlapped in his vision, and he suddenly couldn’t tell when he was.

It was only for an instant, but it was enough to drench Mo Ran in cold sweat.

He had once committed three ruthless acts to Chu Wanning:

First: Murder. He had used the killing technique on Chu Wanning.

Second: Humiliation. He had forced Chu Wanning to sate his carnal desires.

Third.....

The third had been the most gratifying thing he’d done in his previous life, but it had also been his greatest regret in the end.

Of course the emperor of the human world would never admit to regretting any of his actions, but he never did manage to escape the torment deep in his heart.

Damn. Why did he remember that insane past? Why did he remember the Chu Wanning from those days?

Mo Ran shook his head and bit his lips, ardously trying to erase the face of the Chu Wanning in his memories to look over the person before him now with fresh eyes.

Chu Wanning was still glaring at him with an “I’m going to kill you” kind of gaze. Mo Ran didn’t want to provoke this difficult person further, so he could only smile apologetically with a helpless expression.

The ceremony official spoke, “Groom and bride, perform the woguan rite.”

The woguan rite dictated that the newlyweds must first clean themselves individually, and then wash the other’s hands afterwards.

The ghost attendant brought out a porcelain pot filled with clear water, lifting it in invitation for the two to wash their hands. The poured water flowed into a basin underneath.

Chu Wanning's face was full of loathing, having to wash himself and then the other. Mo Ran was absentminded, and silently washed Chu Wanning's hands without making a fuss, but Chu Wanning was ill-tempered and unceremoniously poured the entire pot on Mo Ran, drenching half his sleeve.

"....."

Mo Ran stared at his drenched sleeve for a while. Who knew where his mind had wandered to, but he was so preoccupied that his face hardly even showed a reaction, only a faint light that drifted across the depths of his ink black eyes.

His heart beat wildly as he thought.

Chu Wanning hadn't changed, he'd never changed.

His every action, every thought, last life and this, all of it was exactly the same, not the slightest bit different...

He raised his head slowly, and for an instant, it felt as if he was back at Sisheng Peak, standing before Wushan Palace as Chu Wanning walked toward him on a long stretch of stairs. In the next moment, he would kneel before Mo Ran; that proud head would touch the ground, that upright spine would bend, and Chu Wanning would prostrate before Mo Ran's feet for a long time.

"Woguan rite complete."

The ghost attendant's abrupt chant roused Mo Ran from his memories.

Suddenly coming to, his eyes met with Chu Wanning's, whose pitch black pupils flashed with a cold light like the reflection of a sword, looking quite terrifying.

Mo Ran: "....."

...Uh, the past life was the past life, as for something like making Chu Wanning kneel before him, he would have to make do with just thinking about it in this life, the cost of making it happen was truly too great...

After the woguan rite was the tonglao^[10] rite, and then the hejin^[11] rite.

The ghost attendant chanted slowly, "Husband and wife share a cup of wine, henceforth together until the end of the world."

Wine cups were exchanged in the hejin rite, and after that was the ritual bowing to heaven and earth.

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes narrowed dangerously; he looked like he really was about to lose it, he was so angry. When this was all over, Mo Ran wouldn't be surprised if he chopped the ghost mistress of ceremonies into mud at the very least.

But he really couldn't look too closely at Chu Wanning when he was like this.

Even just one extra glance and he risked falling back into those chaotic, filthy memories, unable to free himself.

"First bow——to heaven and earth——"

Mo Ran thought that even if they were playing along, with Chu Wanning's proud temperament, there was no way he would kneel. But unexpectedly, in order to finish what he started, Chu Wanning closed his eyes, brows twitching, and actually knelt down. Together, the two touched their brows to the ground.

“Second bow——to parents——”

Fine then, kneeling for the faceless paper dolls. Could those even be called one's parents?

“Third bow——husband and wife to each other——”

Chu Wanning's thick eyelashes were lowered as he turned and knelt directly and swiftly without so much as sparing Mo Ran a single glance, but his teeth were tightly clenched.

Who would've known that the two had such poor coordination and had knelt a bit too close. As they bowed, their heads knocked together with a thud.

Chu Wanning sucked in a breath from the pain, holding his forehead and raising teary eyes to glare vengefully at Mo Weiyu, who was also rubbing his forehead.

“.....” Mo Ran could only mouth soundlessly, “Sorry.”

Chu Wanning didn't speak, face gloomy, and rolled his eyes.

After that was the jiefa rite, with the ceremony official chanting, “Cording hair to become husband and wife, conjugal love never to be doubted.” The ghost attendant offered a pair of golden scissors, and Mo Ran couldn't help but flinch, worried that Chu Wanning might just stab him to death in his displeasure. The thought indeed seemed to have passed through Chu Wanning's mind, but in the end they only cut a lock of hair from each other and placed them into a brocade pouch presented by the golden boy and jade maiden, to be kept by the “bride” Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran really wanted to ask, I know you're pissed, but you wouldn't use my hair to curse me or make a voodoo doll or something, right?

The ceremony official chanted, “Ceremony——complete——”

They both sighed in relief and stood up. But unexpectedly, the ceremony official continued,

“The auspicious hour has arrived, enter the bridal chamber [12]——”

What. The. Hell!!!

Mo Ran froze instantly.

And nearly spat out a mouthful of blood!

What kinda joke was this, if he dared to consummate with Chu Wanning, this wedding really would become a fucking ghost wedding! Sure, the saying went that if one should die beneath a peony flower [13], one would still be charming as a ghost, but in this lifetime he wanted...no wait, in both lifetimes he wanted the virtuous Shi Mei, not this cold-blooded demon Chu Wanning who would tie up anyone who coveted him and toss them into a mud pond!!

Was it too late to flee the marriage?

Author's Notes:

Oh, about the wedding verses, originally I planned to search for ones from traditional customs, but I couldn't find anything in depth. Also ghost weddings are not performed the same ways as normal weddings, therefore the lyrics must be different as well. Critics please don't nitpick too much at it.

Also a few details have been deliberately added to the lyrics. Once the entire story is updated, those of you who are interested can come back here and revisit. You will realize these wedding verses are not completely gibberish, there is deeper meaning.

Runs away. Look, bridal chamber time, I don't have to livestream eating turd!

 https://seven771.lofter.com/post/2631b4_1c5e19095

Ch.15 This Venerable One's First Time Seeing THIS Kinda Unveiling of the Wedding Night

Of course something like fleeing the wedding was just wishful thinking. Shi Mei was still here, so he couldn't just leave no matter what.

This damned ghost mistress of ceremonies though, wasn't it a little too fucking diligent?

Mo Ran was pale-faced from both anger and the effort it took to restrain himself. He grumbled to himself, isn't it enough to just oversee the wedding rites, how is the wedding night any of your fucking business? Besides! They were all corpses here! Rigor mortis! How the fuck would the wedding night even work!!!

As for what Chu Wanning's face looked like right now, Mo Ran was too scared to even look, too busy playing dumb with his eyes glued to the carpet. He *really* wanted to grab that ghost mistress of ceremonies, wherever it might be hiding, and roar in its face——FUCK! YOU! You sonuvabitch! You show me how it's done then!!

The golden boy and jade maiden crowded around them, shoving them toward the back of the hall.

A coffin lay there, painted a bright scarlet. It was humongous, twice the size of normal coffins, and looked exactly like the one they'd dug up before.

Chu Wanning murmured something under his breath in understanding.
Mo Ran also figured it out soon after, and let out a huge sigh of relief.

Of course dead people couldn't have an actual wedding night; this so-called wedding night probably just meant being sealed into the same coffin for joint interment, to be "together in death".

The golden boy and jade maiden confirmed their suspicions. "The bride, please enter the bridal chamber first."

Chu Wanning straightened out his wide sleeves and lay inside with a frosty expression.

"Next, the groom, please enter the bridal chamber."

Mo Ran grabbed the edge of the coffin and paused, blinking. Chu Wanning had already occupied more than half the space inside. The coffin might be spacious, but it was still a bit of a squeeze for two whole men. He climbed inside, and inevitably lay down on top of Chu Wanning's spread-out clothing, drawing an irate glare from the other man.

The golden boy and jade maiden circled the coffin and began to sing again, the same eerie yet sorrowful elegy as before.

"Water of the White Emperor, waves sparkling and luminous;
Spirit amant birds greet, bearing blossoms between their beaks.
Within this coffin, two shall join;
Within this sanctuary, two shall lie.
Intent in life, revealed in death.
Henceforth two shall pass beneath the heavens;
Henceforth in death lone souls shall never part."

Song finished, the children stood one to the left and one to the right, and slowly pushed the lid of the coffin into place. A dull rumble, and they were surrounded by complete darkness.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were sealed inside the coffin.

The coffin was thick enough that they could speak quietly without being heard from the outside. Chu Wanning raised his hand and set a soundproofing barrier to ensure that they definitely wouldn't be heard. Having done all that, the first thing he said was——

"Move over, you're on my arm."

Mo Ran: "....."

Aren't there matters more pressing than "you're on my arm" that should be discussed right now?

Despite the internal complaint, Mo Ran still scooted over.

"Move over more, there's no room for my legs."

More scooting.

"Move more! You're right next to my face!"

Mo Ran whined, aggrieved, "Shizun, I'm up against the side already, what else do you want?"

Chu Wanning finally humph'd and went silent.

Mo Ran was crammed into the corner for a while before the coffin suddenly shook, lifted by people on the outside who started slowly moving in some unknown direction, the coffin rocking with their every step. Mo Ran strained to listen to the sounds from the outside as he seethed, thinking about how Shi Mei was probably trapped in a coffin with Chen-Yao right now, but there was nothing he could do about it.

Chu Wanning's barrier was powerful, preventing sounds from the inside from getting out while allowing sounds from the outside to pass through. The sounds of firecrackers and shawms could be heard through the wall of the coffin. Mo Ran asked, "This gaggle of ghosts and demons sure are bored, just where are they taking these coffins?"

It was too dark inside the coffin to see the other person's face, so he could only hear Chu Wanning's voice. "It's the same as Butterfly Town's tradition, the destination should be the temple outside town."

Mo Ran nodded and concentrated on listening for a while. "...Shizun, there seem to be more and more footsteps outside."

"Ghosts travel at night, all of the coffins will be carried over together. If my guess is right, the ghost mistress of ceremonies will appear in its true form at the temple to draw 'merits' from the newly wed couples."

Mo Ran asked, "Won't people notice hundreds of coffins being carried through town?"

"They will not," Chu Wanning answered. "The coffins are carried by ghost golden boys and jade maidens. Ordinary people cannot see objects carried by ghosts."

Mo Ran wondered, "How are you so sure about that?"

Chu Wanning said, "I used Tianwen to interrogate a ghost golden boy in the dressing room earlier."

Mo Ran: "....."

They were silent for a while before he questioned, "What was the deal with that red coffin on the mountain then, the one with Chen-gongzi in it? And why do people keep dying in the Chen family?"

Chu Wanning: "Not sure."

Mo Ran was slightly surprised. "The golden boy didn't tell you?"

Chu Wanning: "The ghost golden boy said it also did not know."

Mo Ran: "....."

It was quiet again for a bit, then Chu Wanning spoke, "But I think that family is hiding something from us."

"Why do you say that?"

"Remember, although the thing enshrined in that temple exudes evil energy, it is still a being that has cultivated into a deity and depends on the people's worship to grow stronger."

Mo Ran had never paid attention to Chu Wanning's lessons in his previous life, and so had ended up not having a lot of the basic general knowledge needed to handle certain matters later on. He thought that perhaps he should actually be modest and seek some instruction in this reborn life, and so asked, "What's so significant about deities?"

"...What were you doing during last month's lesson on the differences between deities, ghosts, gods, and demons?"

Mo Ran thought to himself, this venerable one was reborn, of course this venerable one wouldn't remember what he was doing during some lesson from more than ten years ago! But he'd probably been either picking at his feet under the table, reading 《Bedroom Adventures of Nine Dragons and a Phoenix》, ogling Shi Mei while lost in thought, or staring at Chu Wanning's neck while secretly gesturing the various ways of cutting that person's head off.

Chu Wanning reprimanded him with, "Copy 《Record of Knowledge from the Six Kingdoms》 ten times as punishment when we return."

"...Oh."

All those times he'd skipped class had come back to bite him in the ass.

"Deities differ from gods. Gods can act as they please, but deities cannot meddle in mortal affairs without being beseeched to do so."

Mo Ran felt a shiver run down his spine. "Which means that it killed the members of the Chen family at the behest of a person?"

Chu Wanning's voice sounded ominous in the darkness.

"The beseecher may not necessarily be a living person."

Mo Ran opened his mouth to ask more questions, but before he could, the coffin shook abruptly and tilted to the left, perhaps because the golden boy and jade maiden carrying the coffin came upon a hill or some such.

With the sudden jolt, the slippery inside, and the complete lack of anything to grab onto, Mo Ran tumbled over and smacked firmly into Shizun's chest.

"Nn..."

Mo Ran put a hand over his aching nose and lifted his head, disoriented, but a faint wisp of the fragrance of haitang flowers floated to his nose. The scent was as light as the fog at dawn, with a hint of a nighttime chill. Such scents ordinarily lulled people into a haze, but this one was clean and refreshing, clearing the head instead.

Mo Ran froze, then immediately became hard.

He couldn't be any more familiar with this fragrance. It was Chu Wanning's scent. But to Mo Ran, this scent had always been intertwined with desire.

All of a sudden, a certain deep-seated depravity, like a lightning-stricken forest fire, shot directly into his head.

Author's Notes:

Leader of the old age single men's foundation, #1 Boss ghost mistress of ceremonies, soon will be online.

Mistress of ceremonies has a special bridal chambers method. Lock this pair of dogs in a coffin. Boom! The only way to leave is to confess to each other, otherwise you can't come out. Hmmph!

Ch.16 This Venerable One Is Stunned

[">>>corpse orgy this chapter and next](#)

Mo Ran really couldn't be blamed for being so beastlike; trapped in a tight space with someone you'd gone to bed with countless times regardless of whether it was heartfelt or feigned, out of revenge or fondness, smelling their familiar scent, anyone else's thoughts would waver too, in a situation like this.

Besides, Mo Ran was a reprobate to start with.

Shi Mei was his moonlight, he didn't have the heart to touch him, couldn't risk ruining him.

But he had no qualms about wrecking Chu Wanning. Toward Chu Wanning, he could vent all of his immoralities, bestial desires, and bone-deep savagery without restraint.

Grind this person into dust, pin him down, tear him apart, run him through, subject him to everything that he would never even think of doing to Shi Mei.

In the past life, every time he'd seen Chu Wanning with his head thrown back, neck bared and the jut at his throat moving, he'd felt like he might lose

himself and turn into a bloodthirsty beast, consumed by the desire to rip open his throat, guzzle his blood, crush his bones.

He didn't care for Chu Wanning, and so he held nothing back.

Even his body developed a habit from all the profaning; just the smell of Chu Wanning's scent would light a fire in his abdomen and make his heart itch, make him want to tie this person to the bed and fuck him.

Mo Ran's frenzied heartbeats could be heard in the silence of the coffin.

He knew that Chu Wanning's face was somewhere close, because he could feel his breaths. If he were to lunge forward with a bite now, Chu Wanning wouldn't be able to get away, but...

Nevermind.

Mo Ran shuffled backwards away from Chu Wanning, not without much difficulty because the coffin really was cramped.

"Sorry about that, Shizun." Mo Ran laughed awkwardly. "Didn't expect the coffin to sha——ke!"

As he was speaking, the coffin tilted again. Mo Ran rolled into Chu Wanning's arms once again.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran scuffled backwards again, and the coffin lurched again. This repeated over and over.

"Did I get cursed or what." Mo Ran scurried back once more.

The golden boy and jade girl were probably going up a slope. It was too slippery inside the coffin, and Mo Ran rolled helplessly back into Chu Wanning again before long.

"Shizun..." Mo Ran bit his lip, putting on a pitiful air.

This guy was born with endearing looks, he could hide his wolf tail and pull a convincing puppy dog act if he put his mind to it.

Chu Wanning said nothing.

Mo Ran really did not want to get rolled around any more, so he simply gave up on fighting it altogether. "I'm really not doing it on purpose."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran continued in a small voice, "The wounds on my back hurt from hitting the wall..."

In the darkness, Chu Wanning seemed to sigh softly. The gongs and drums outside were too loud, and Mo Ran couldn't be sure if he heard right.

But in the next moment, the smell of haitang flowers grew stronger as Chu Wanning placed his hand behind Mo Ran's back to block off the gap so that Mo Ran wouldn't bump into it again.

It wasn't quite a hug—Chu Wanning held his arm at a distance and made sure not to make any contact with Mo Ran's body, other than his clothes draping on Mo Ran—but this position was still a little intimate.

"Be careful, don't hit it again." His voice was deep, like porcelain submerged in a creek, steady and dignified. It would have been a striking voice to listen to, if one listened without a shroud of hatred.

"...Mn."

No one spoke after that.

Mo Ran was still a growing teenager at this moment, not as tall as he would be as an adult. Right now, in Chu Wanning's arms, his forehead only reached Chu Wanning's chin.

This kind of feeling was very familiar, yet also very unfamiliar.

The familiar part was the person lying beside him.

The unfamiliar part was the position they were in.

In the previous lifetime, not so long ago, it had always been him lying in Sisheng Peak's Wushan Palace, a lonesome Taxian-jun with no one left to turn to, in a darkness so endless that he could hardly breathe, clutching Chu Wanning tightly in his arms.

He was already taller than Chu Wanning then, and stronger than his Shizun. His arms were like clamps, like shackles, latching onto the remaining bit of warmth in his arms, as if holding on to the very last ember of fire in this world.

He lowered his head to kiss Chu Wanning's inky black hair, then leaned in close, insatiable, and burrowed his face into the crook of Chu Wanning's neck, ruthlessly biting, gnawing.

"I hate you, Chu Wanning. I really hate you so much."

His voice was a little hoarse.

"But you're all I have left."

Mo Ran was none too gently jolted out of his memories by a series of crashes and bumps. The sound of gongs and drums stopped abruptly, and a deathly silence settled over everything.

"Shizun..."

Chu Wanning reached out and pressed a finger to his lips, cautioning in a low voice, "Don't talk. We're here."

Sure enough, there were no more footsteps outside, only silence.

Chu Wanning's fingertip lit up with a faint golden light. A quick slash on the coffin wall, and a narrow gap was cut open, just enough for them to peek outside.

They had indeed been brought to the outskirts of Butterfly Town. The front of the temple was already densely cluttered with coffins, and the heavy scent of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance in the air grew heavier still, drifting through the opening into the coffin.

Mo Ran suddenly realized that something was off. "Shizun, does it seem like this scent, and the one in the illusory realm too, aren't quite the same as the scent in Chen-gongzi's coffin?"

"...How so?"

Mo Ran had a keen sense of smell. "At the northern mountain before, when the coffin first split open, the scent that drifted out then was pleasant smelling

and didn't cause me any discomfort, that one was almost certainly the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance. But ever since we entered the illusory realm, I kept feeling like the smell, although similar, was somewhat different, but couldn't quite put my finger on it, but now... I think I know what it is."

Chu Wanning turned to look at him. "You dislike this smell?"

Mo Ran was still pressed against the opening, peering outside. "Mn. I've hated the smell of incense ever since I was little. The scent here and in the illusory realm aren't Hundred Butterfly Fragrance at all, but the scent of the special incense that the people of Butterfly Town burn for the ghost mistress of ceremonies. Look over there——"

Chu Wanning followed his gaze, and saw three arm-thick incense sticks in the incense burner in front of the temple, their scent diffusing leisurely into the airflow.

The people of Butterfly Town made all kinds of scented products using flowers, and even their incense was locally produced. Since everything was made from the flowers grown around town, the resulting scents were quite similar to people who were unfamiliar with the art.

Chu Wanning pondered. "Could it be that the scent in Chen-gongzi's coffin actually has nothing to do with the one in the illusion?"

Before he could finish mulling over this new detail, his thoughts were interrupted by a piercing red light from within the temple. They both looked in that direction to see the light shining resplendent, illuminating the whole area. A row of red lotus lamps, used for making wishes, sat on a stand by the side of the temple; one by one, they all lit up.

The ghost children escorting the coffins all knelt at once, chanting, "Mistress of Ceremonies descending, pray guide these lonely souls to escape suffering and find mates, joined in burial, partnered in afterlife."

The statue of the ghost mistress of ceremonies inside the temple emitted a holy golden light amidst the thundering chant, then its eyelids lowered, the corners of its lips moved slowly, and it leapt gracefully from the altar.

Graceful movement, poised bearing.

Unfortunately the body, made of clay, was much too heavy, and the young maiden landed with a thud, smashing a huge crater into the ground.

Mo Ran: "Pfft."

Chu Wanning: "....."

The ghost mistress seemed to be aware of it as well. It stared at the crater for quite a while before stepping out with slow, deliberate steps, rearranging its clothing.

Its appearance was that of a maiden draped in rich reds, face painted with makeup and a strand of cypress in its hair, looking quite festive. In the darkness of night, it turned its neck one way then the other, and came to a stop in front of the hundred coffins. The breeze was suffused with the stench of corpse rot; its mood seemed to improve, and it slowly spread out its arms, letting out a "ge, ge" sound of laughter.

"All who believe in me and worship me shall be granted a partner in marriage, fulfilling that which they were denied in life." The delicate voice drifted in the night, and the ghosts and monsters all began to prostrate in gratitude.

"Mistress of Ceremonies bless——"

"Mistress of Ceremonies pray bestow the marriage——"

Such pleas came wave after wave; the ghost mistress seemed delighted as it weaved slowly between the rows of coffins, dragging its long, scarlet-painted nails along them, the shrill sound ear-piercing.

Mo Ran wondered, "Shizun, I remember you mentioning before that monsters, deities, ghosts, gods, demons, and humans each occupied their own realms. Why's this deity hanging out with the ghosts down here instead of living it up in the Ninth Heaven upstairs?"

"Because it is in charge of ghost marriages, and is sustained by the worship of ghosts," Chu Wanning responded. "The ghosts provide it with immense merits, else it would not have cultivated into a deity in a mere few hundred years. With such an advantageous arrangement, it is naturally glad to keep the company of these Underworld 'friends'."

The ghost mistress circled around the cluster of coffins and returned to the front, and the delicate voice rang out once again. "Each coffin to be opened shall be bestowed a marriage. Starting from the left."

Following its command, the first coffin on the left side slowly opened, a pair of golden boy and jade girl bowing respectfully by its side. The corpses inside climbed out unsteadily, their faces looking even more deathly pale against the vibrant red of their wedding garments.

The couple slowly made their way before the ghost mistress and knelt.

The ghost mistress put its hand between them and spoke. "As the Mistress of Ceremonies, I hereby confer thee with a posthumous marriage. Henceforth you are husband and wife, male and female joyous in the joining."

Mo Ran rolled his eyes and muttered, "Don't wax poetic if you don't know how to. These wedding vows sound obscene."

Chu Wanning commented coldly, "You have quite the indecent imagination."

Mo Ran shut up.

But, before long, the ghost mistress promptly demonstrated that, in fact, the indecent one here was not Mo Ran, but this deity in charge of ghost marriages.

It was as if the pair of newlywed corpses had consumed aphrodisiacs; they were clearly already dead, yet they tore at each other's clothing, kissing and hugging in a frenzied tangle right then and there, shamelessly out in the open in front of everyone.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran: "....."

"As the Mistress of Ceremonies, I hereby grant thee the joys of the natural order. Yin and Yang may mate, life or death no matter!"

The ghost mistress's shrieking grew increasingly shrill and haughty.

The corpses' movements also grew increasingly exaggerated. The male corpse divested himself of clothing and was ridiculously vigorous, no different from a live person.

Mo Ran was totally stunned. "...You can't just...fucking...do that???"

Ch.17 This Venerable One's Shizun Got Injured, This Venerable One Really...

What was this ghost mistress even doing being a mistress of ceremonies! Change your career and sell aphrodisiacs instead! Other people's aphrodisiacs can maybe at best make a wilted live person show off some male prowess, but these gods and deities are truly something else, a slight wave of the hand and even a dead person can get it up, truly miraculous!

Just as he was getting really into the show, Chu Wanning suddenly reached out and covered Mo Ran's ears.

Mo Ran: "Eh?"

Chu Wanning's expression was frozen over. "Don't look at such obscenity."

"But why are you covering my ears instead of my eyes?"

Chu Wanning said, expressionlessly, "Don't look or listen, you can close your eyes yourself."

Mo Ran: "Pfft. Shizun, you're really..." Take a look at your own blushing face, even your ears are red, the one who should be closing their eyes here is clearly you.

Mo Ran couldn't help his amusement. Chu Wanning was a person made of ice and snow, who'd never even seen a single erotic painting; to have to witness a coupling at such close quarters now, he just might choke to death.

The dead couple almost seemed to come alive as they screwed. Even their stiff throats that shouldn't have been able to produce any noise at all somehow started making lifelike moaning and panting sounds.

Chu Wanning turned away from the sight, too disgusted to continue looking.

Mo Ran's amusement only grew. With a mischievous grin and full teasing intention, he reached out to turn Chu Wanning's face back.

Chu Wanning flinched back immediately as if stung. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing whatsoever." Mo Ran's voice was honey-sweet with a hint of mockery as he looked at him.

How old are you already, still red-faced at this stuff...

Oh, wait, it's more like green and red-faced at the same time. Pretty hilarious actually.

"Shizun, didn't you teach us to always make sure of the opponent's capabilities before engaging? You have to at least look and see the ghost mistress's capabilities."

"What's there to see. I'm not looking."

Mo Ran sighed. "How is your face this thin."

Chu Wanning shot back, "Filthy debauchery, harmful to the eyes!"

"Guess I'll have to look then." Mo Ran said as he lay there cheekily, peering outside and providing a running commentary of "ah", "wow", "awesome", "aiyo",

and so on. Chu Wanning was so furious he was about to explode, and bellowed in a low voice, "Look if you want, don't talk!"

Mo Ran played innocent. "I thought you'd want to know."

Chu Wanning finally couldn't take it anymore. Gripping Mo Ran by the neck, he hissed through gritted teeth, "If you make *one* more sound, I will throw you out there to feed the zombies!"

Mo Ran'd had his fun; with Chu Wanning, you really couldn't push him too far unless you wanted the full service from Tianwen, and so Mo Ran showed some restraint and obediently lay there watching without a sound.

As the ghost couple's pleasure peaked, the male corpse let out a low roar and spasmed on top of the female corpse. A wisp of green smoke suddenly rose from their bodies, and the ghost mistress opened its mouth, greedily sucking it in until every last tendril of smoke was consumed. It wiped the corner of its mouth with satisfaction, eyes shining.

That would be the "merit" from the ghost marriage couples that increased its cultivation.

"Haha, hahaha——" Having had a taste, the ghost mistress was beaming all the more. When it spoke again, its faint drifting voice had become much clearer; it shouted, bellowed, sharp voice sounding as if it could rip through the endless night. "Get up! Get up! All you single men and unwed women! I grant you the blessings of intimacy! You shall provide me worship in return! Up! Up! All of you, up!"

Mo Ran's heart thumped: Shit.....

What was it planning to do?!

The simultaneous shaking of the hundreds of coffins around them confirmed Mo Ran's worst fears. The ghost mistress was going to call on the couples in all of the coffins to screw so that it could consume all the merits at once!

This was no joking matter. Mo Ran pulled at Chu Wanning. "Shizun!!!"

"What is it this time!"

"Hurry! We have to get out there! Shi Mei is trapped with that Chen woman!" Mo Ran was beside himself with panic. "We have to hurry and save him!"

Chu Wanning glanced outside. Who would've thought the ghost mistress would have such an appetite, skipping individual pairings to eat it all at once!

The coffins around them shook more and more violently as the ghost marriage couples inside were compelled to do the deed. Chu Wanning gagged at the thought, color draining from his face even more. Just then, the beaming ghost mistress seemed to feel something; its head twisted abruptly, a pair of pure black, pupil-less eyes passing over all the rest to stare directly at Mo Ran and Chu Wanning's coffin.

It might not be smart, but it could feel the absence of the familiar venereal energy from that coffin.

There was no worship.

There was no...

They were alive!!!

Its back arched abruptly and it charged, shrieking, with its clothing billowing behind it, and a pair of blood-red and razor-sharp claws pierced directly through the wood and into the coffin.

The attack was too sudden, Mo Ran had no time to dodge or defend, and besides, there was hardly any room for movement inside the coffin to start with.

Just as five new holes were about to be added to his head from the boney claws, he was suddenly shifted lower—Chu Wanning had swiftly gathered him into his arms, covering him with his own body. The ghost mistress's five claws sunk viciously into Chu Wanning's shoulder!

Deep to the bone!

“.....”

Chu Wanning let out a muted groan, but endured it without crying out. His uninjured hand glowed with a silencing spell as he pressed a finger to Mo Ran's lips, blocking off the sound that he was about to make.

The ghost mistress's claws dug into Chu Wanning's flesh, scratching and tearing.

It had clay for a head, and could only tell the living from the dead by sound. The situation being like this, Chu Wanning really didn't make a single noise as blood poured from his shoulder. Mo Ran couldn't see his injury from where he was pressed against his chest, but he could clearly feel Chu Wanning trembling...

Alive...or dead? There was no way a living person would still not make a sound at this. The ghost mistress couldn't make sense of things, and her claws in Chu Wanning's shoulder brutally continued digging, tearing.

Chu Wanning trembled from the pain, shuddering, robes drenched in cold sweat.

But still he did not falter, biting his lip as he protected the disciple in his arms, as if he had really become a corpse, blocking the opening in the coffin like forged metal.

The ghost mistress finally seemed satisfied that the people inside couldn't possibly be alive. It abruptly pulled out its claws, and blood splattered, accompanied by the sticky sound of fingers sliding against flesh and bone, making one's hair stand on end.

All the strength drained out of Chu Wanning's tense body at once. He let go of Mo Ran, panting quietly.

The smell of blood inside the coffin was suffocating.

Mo Ran lifted his head. By the dim light streaming through the holes, he could see Chu Wanning's lowered eyelashes, and beneath them, unshed tears in those silent, stubborn eyes.

Those phoenix eyes were blurred with pain, but even more of it was fierce and headstrong, layered in wetness...

Mo Ran wanted to talk, but Chu Wanning shook his head and maintained the silencing spell on his lips. A while passed before he let out a slow breath and wrote on the back of Mo Ran's hand with a trembling fingertip:

The barrier has been breached, do not speak.

Outside, the ghost mistress tilted its head, unable to understand why the people inside were definitely not alive yet refuse to obey its commands, not sensing any worship from them.

Chu Wanning glimpsed at it through the crack, a golden light enveloping his uninjured hand as a willow vine appeared, fire light coursing through it.

He narrowed his eyes, Tianwen in hand.

And in the next moment burst out from the coffin!!!

The coffin split apart and Chu Wanning flew up like lightning, Tianwen lashing out with perfect accuracy to wrap around the ghost mistress's neck as it let out an ear-piercing screech—

“Who are you! How dare you!”

Chu Wanning’s answer was one word: “Scram!”

Crimson wedding robes bellowed like waves of clouds. He had endured everything to make this one hit count, and Tianwen wrung with savage brutality, directly snapping the ghost mistress’s neck!

A dense red mist mixed with a strange perfumed scent welled out from the severed neck. Chu Wanning drew back rapidly to avoid it, calling out an order: “Mo Ran! Thousand Strikes!”

Mo Ran was waiting at the ready. Hearing the command, he channeled spiritual energy into the hidden blade in his sleeve and directed the strike at the ghost mistress’s body that was groping around for its head.

The body of clay cracked open, revealing within it the ghost mistress’s translucent true body, radiating red light. Chu Wanning raised Tianwen again and ripped the ghost mistress’s celestial spirit right out. A scream came from within that headless body: “How dare you! How dare you! ——Get up! Get up! Kill them! Kill them——!!”

Blood-red eyes suddenly lit up on the featureless faces of the golden boys and jade girls, hundreds of them shrieking as they charged toward Mo Ran and Chu Wanning.

The coffins on the ground also shattered one after another, the corpses inside standing and rushing toward the two like a tide.

Mo Ran’s gaze darted rapidly between the crowd, looking for Shi Mei. Chu Wanning said harshly, “What are you doing, making eyes at zombies! Hurry and fend them off!”

In the chaos of the battle with the ghost mistress, they had ended up standing on a coffin, with the slow-moving corpses gathered all around them. Mo Ran lit up a handful of exorcism talismans and tossed them out, explosions following, but there were just too many of them, one defeated wave rapidly replaced by the next.

Mo Ran was losing his mind. “Why are there so many dead people at Butterfly Town? Just how many ghost marriage couples are there?!!”

Aggravated, Chu Wanning said, “Look at this ghost mistress’s cultivation, of course there wouldn’t be this many young people dying of natural causes! Eight or nine out of ten were probably bewitched by it to commit suicide! Attack over here!”

Mo Ran flung another talisman in the direction Chu Wanning indicated, and white bone and rotten flesh flew in the resultant explosion.

“How is this ghost mistress not dead from that?”

“Normal weapons cannot hurt it.”

“Then what about Tianwen?”

Chu Wanning was incensed. “Do you not see that Tianwen is binding it right now! This thing is extremely fast, if I release the bind, it’ll probably have escaped before the next lash!”

More and more corpses gathered. Mo Ran kept an eye out for Shi Mei in the crowd as he purged them for fear of accidentally injuring him. A golden boy

threw itself at him and bit him savagely on the leg, he cursed under his breath and flung a talisman on its face before kicking it into the crowd of corpses where it exploded with a loud bang.

Chu Wanning said, "Do you see Shi Mei and Mistress Chen yet?"

Mo Ran searched frantically before finally spotting two swaying figures in the distance. He exclaimed, "I see them!"

"Get the hell over there and pull them back! As far away as you can!"

"Got it!" Mo Ran answered, then paused. "What are you going to do?"

Chu Wanning said, exasperated, "I can't lift my other arm to summon another weapon, so I'll have to use Tianwen. I'm going to destroy this entire area as soon as I release the ghost mistress, so get lost if you don't want to die!"

Ch.18 This Venerable One Once Begged You

Tianwen had a killing technique with no blind spots. Its name was simple, just one word, "Wind". Once activated, it obliterates everything it touches in the surrounding area.

Of course Mo Ran had personally tasted the ferocity of "Wind" before; he was also well aware of Chu Wanning's capabilities, and knew that there was no need to worry. He glanced one last time at that pale-faced man draped in wedding robes red like blood, and tossed out the last of his exorcism talismans to buy Chu Wanning some time. He then leapt to the side, holding Shi Mei in one arm and grabbing Mistress Chen with the other to take both unconscious people to hide at a distance away.

Chu Wanning, bearing through the searing pain, forced his other hand to move. Tianwen lit up immediately with a dazzling golden light, and Chu Wanning drew the willow vine back with a sharp movement.

Once released from the restraint, the ghost mistress's face twisted as it leapt up and headed straight for Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning's robes danced like flames in the wind. With a fierce expression and blood soaking through half his robes, he raised his hand toward the heavens, Tianwen's golden light intensifying menacingly as he began to whirl it.

The willow vine suddenly grew in length by several dozen feet as it spun into a golden vortex, drawing in everything from its surroundings. The ghosts, corpses, golden boys and jade girls, and even the snarling ghost mistress, all of it was pulled into the center of "Wind" and instantly minced by Tianwen's swift ferocity!!!

"Wind" was indiscriminately destructive, even the grass and trees in the area were uprooted, nothing escaped its onslaught.

With Chu Wanning as its center, a resplendent golden storm of immense proportions blanketed the skies, and coffins and corpses alike were swept into the gale.

It consumed everything in reach, all of it drawn into the storm and torn apart by the swift whirling of Tianwen.

Shredded into so much debris...

When the dust had settled, Chu Wanning was left standing in the middle of a barren wasteland.

Other than his solitary figure standing amidst the ruins, shrouded in brilliant scarlet like a blooming red lotus, a fallen haitang blossom, there was only the ground, covered in shattered white bone, and a terrifying Tianwen with golden light still coursing along its length.

Looking at this, it was pretty clear that Chu Wanning really was being quite considerate when he whipped the disciples.

Considering the preceding demonstration, he definitely could have pulverized every single one of them at the Platform of Sin and Virtue in an instant if he felt like it...

The golden light gradually faded.

Tianwen turned into sparkling stardust and returned into Chu Wanning's palm.

He exhaled deeply, brows furrowed, and slowly walked toward his disciples in the distance, ignoring the pain in his shoulder.

"How is Shi Mei?"

Chu Wanning asked when he reached their side, still enduring silently.

Mo Ran looked down at the unconscious beauty Shi in his arms, still not awake. His breaths were shallow and his cheek cold to the touch. This scene was much too familiar, a nightmare that Mo Ran once could not escape in life or death.

That time, Shi Mei had also been lying in his arms, just like this, when he gradually stopped breathing...

Chu Wanning leaned down to press his fingers against Mistress Chen and Shi Mei's necks, feeling for their pulse. He murmured, "Hm? How is the poisoning this deep?"

Mo Ran's head snapped up. "Poison? Didn't you say it was nothing to worry about? Didn't you say they were merely hypnotized?"

Chu Wanning's brows were furrowed. "The ghost mistress uses the fragrance in its hypnosis, it's a kind of poison. I expected only minor poisoning, not something of this magnitude."

"....."

"Take them back to Chen Manor first," Chu Wanning continued. "It's not difficult to draw out the poison, what's important is that they're alive."

He spoke with a flat, indifferent tone. Even though this was how Chu Wanning usually spoke, in these current circumstances, it made him seem callous and dismissive.

Mo Ran was violently thrust back into his memories of the snowstorm that year, when he'd knelt in the snow holding Shi Mei in his arms as his life drained away bit by bit. His face had been stained with tears, and he'd screamed himself hoarse as he begged Chu Wanning to turn around, to spare his disciple a glance, begged Chu Wanning to lift a hand and save his disciple's life.

But what had Chu Wanning said then?

In a dismissive voice with an impassive tone, like so.

Just like this, he had refused the only time Mo Ran had ever knelt and begged in his life.

Amidst the falling snow, the person in his arms had gradually grown cold, like the snowflakes that fell on Mo Ran's shoulders and clung to his eyelashes.

That day, Chu Wanning had killed two disciples with his own hands.

One was Shi Mingjing, who he could have saved but had not.

One was Mo Weiyu, whose heart had drowned in grief as he knelt in the snow.

His heart was suddenly overcome with dread, with viciousness, with unreconciled malice and savagery that slithered like a snake.

For an instant he felt a violent urge to close his hands around Chu Wanning's neck, to shed this amiable disguise and bare his demonic appearance, to turn into a vicious ghost from the past life and tear into Chu Wanning's flesh, wring some answers, exact his revenge.

Revenge for the lives of those two helpless disciples in the snow.

But when he looked up, his gaze landed on Chu Wanning's bloodstained shoulder.

The bestial roar died in his throat.

He didn't make another sound as he stared at Chu Wanning's face with a gaze bordering on hatred, but Chu Wanning didn't notice. After a while, Mo Ran lowered his head to look at Shi Mei's pale face.

His mind grew blank.

If something happens to Shi Mei again, then...

“Cough cough cough!!”

The person in his arms suddenly let out a fit of coughs. Mo Ran startled, heart quivering... Shi Mei slowly opened his eyes and murmured in a hoarse, feeble voice.

“A...Ran...?”

“Yes! It's me!” Relief and joy washed away all his anxieties. Mo Ran's eyes opened wide as he pressed a hand to Shi Mei's cold cheek, eyes flickering over him. “Shi Mei, how are you feeling? Does it hurt anywhere?”

Shi Mei smiled lightly, expression soft. He looked around: “...How did we get here...did I pass out...Ah! Shizun...cough cough, this disciple was incompetent...this disciple...”

Chu Wanning said, “Don't speak.”

He fed Shi Mei a pill. “Since you're awake, hold this poison-cleansing pill in your mouth, don't swallow it.”

Shi Mei did so obediently, then started, even more color draining from his already pale face. “Shizun, how did you get injured? You're covered in blood...”

Chu Wanning answered in that same infuriatingly flat and indifferent voice, “It's nothing.”

He stood and glanced at Mo Ran.

“You, figure out a way to take them back to the Chen Manor.”

Now that Shi Mei was awake, Mo Ran's dejection had completely dissipated. He nodded amenably. “Alright!”

“I'm going to head back first, there's something I need to ask the Chen family.”

Chu Wanning turned and left. Facing the boundless night, with nothing but withered grass in all directions, he finally couldn't hold it in anymore, and furrowed his brows, letting the pain he felt show on his face.

His entire shoulder had been pierced by the five claws, the flesh and tendons torn. The ghost mistress's claws had cut deep to the bone. However much he might have feigned composure and endured it, sealing the veins so that he wouldn't pass out from blood loss, he was still only human.

He still felt pain...

But, so what if it hurt.

One foot in front of the other, wedding robes fluttering in the air.

All these years, everyone respected him, feared him, but never did anyone dare to stand by his side, never did anyone concern themselves with his well-being. He was already used to it.

Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal.

Unloved from head to toe, uncared for whether alive, dead, sick, or suffering.

It seemed like, from birth, he had never needed another's support, never needed anything to depend on, and never needed anyone for company.

So there was no need to say it hurt, and even less point in crying. He would just go back and wrap it up himself, cut off the torn and dead flesh, apply some salve, and it would be fine.

It didn't matter that no one cared about him.

He'd already come this far by himself anyway. All these years, it'd been fine. He could take care of himself.

He arrived at the gates to the Chen Manor, but before he could step into the yard, a burst of shrill screams came from within.

Heedless of his wounds ripping open, Chu Wanning rushed inside—only to see Madam Chen with a head of disheveled hair and both eyes closed, chasing her son and husband all over the place. Only the young daughter of the Chen family was spared; she stood nervously to the side, small body cowering in fear and shaking uncontrollably.

Seeing Chu Wanning, Landlord Chen and his youngest son threw themselves at him with terrified cries. "Daozhang! Daozhang save us!"

Chu Wanning shielded them behind himself, gaze sweeping over Madam Chen's closed eyes. He berated them, "Didn't I say to keep your eyes on her and make sure she doesn't fall asleep!"

"We couldn't watch her all the time! My wife's health is weak, so she usually sleeps early. After you left, she tried to stay awake at first, but then dozed off and started going berserk! Yelling something...yelling..."

Landlord Chen cowered behind Chu Wanning, shaking, and completely did not notice that the Daozhang was wearing wedding robes, or the gaping wound on his shoulder.

Chu Wanning frowned. "Yelling about what?"

Before Landlord Chen even opened his mouth to respond, the crazed Madam charged over with her teeth bared, but the mournful cry that came from her lips was in the voice of a young girl——

"Heartless and dishonest! Heartless and dishonest! Pay me back with your lives! I want all of you to die!"

“...Ghost possession,” Chu Wanning said. He looked back at Landlord Chen and demanded in a harsh voice, “Do you know this voice?”

Landlord Chen’s lips trembled, and his eyes darted this way and that. He swallowed nervously as he said, “I don’t know, I’m not familiar, I don’t recognize it! Daozhang please save us! Daozhang please exorcise the ghost!”

By this time Madam Chen was mere steps away. Chu Wanning lifted his uninjured arm and pointed at her, and a bolt of lightning instantly struck the skies and trapped Madam Chen inside a barrier.

Chu Wanning spoke coldly with a sidelong glance, “You truly do not recognize it?”

Landlord Chen cried repeatedly, “I truly do not! I truly do not!”

Chu Wanning didn’t bother wasting any more words. He swung out Tianwen and bound Madam Chen inside the barrier.

He really ought to have bound Landlord Chen instead, it would have been both more convenient and easier to interrogate. But Chu Wanning had his own principles; he did not lightly use Tianwen to interrogate normal people. So he skipped over the easy target to interrogate the ghost in Madam Chen’s body instead.

Interrogating ghosts was different from interrogating people.

When interrogating a person with Tianwen, the person would be unable to bear the torment and directly confess.

But when interrogating a ghost with Tianwen, a barrier would be formed with only Chu Wanning and the ghost inside, where the ghost would regain its appearance in life and divulge the information to Chu Wanning.

Tianwen suddenly ignited into flames, which surged along the vine from Chu Wanning’s side all the way to Madam Chen.

The Madam shrieked and started twitching as the red flames on the willow vine suddenly turned into an eerie blue ghost fire that burned from the Madam’s side back to Chu Wanning’s side.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. The flames burned along the willow vine to his hand, but the ghost fire couldn’t hurt him, even as it burned up the length of his arm to his chest, and then went out.

“.....”

The Chen family watched on with horror and apprehension, unsure what Chu Wanning was doing.

Chu Wanning’s eyelashes fluttered lightly, both eyes still closed, but a beam of white light slowly appeared before his eyes, followed by a fair-skinned foot stepping out of the beam, and a young girl of about seventeen or eighteen appeared in his view.

Ch.19 This Venerable One Will Tell You a Story

The girl was fair-skinned and tidy, with an oval face and large, round eyes, very charming. She wore a light pink ruqun and her hair was bound up, bearing the innocent and inexperienced appearance of a new wife. She rubbed her eyes dazedly in the dark, looking around.

“Where...am I?”

"You are within the Truth Restoration Barrier I have set," Chu Wanning replied.

The girl was shocked and asked, bewildered, "Who are you? Why is it pitch black here? I can't see you, who is speaking?"

"Have you forgotten? ...You're already dead," Chu Wanning said.

The girl's eyes widened. "I'm already...I..."

Then, gradually, she remembered.

She bowed her head, and crossed her hands over her chest. There was no undulating beat there. She "ah"-ed softly and murmured, "I'm...I'm already dead..."

"Only souls can come to this Truth Restoration Barrier. Hatred is erased here. Those who have passed, no matter if they've transformed into a menacing ghost or a regular ghost, they will maintain the character and appearance of when they were alive. Hence, 'Truth Restoration'."

Stunned, the girl was lost in thought for a moment, as if she was gradually recalling her past life in the world. Then, suddenly, she lowered her face and started weeping silently.

"Do you...have grievances?" Chu Wanning asked.

The girl's voice was thick with tears. "Are you the King of the Underworld? Or are you the Greeter of the Dead^[14]? Are you here to bring me justice?"

Chu Wanning rested a hand on his temple. "...I'm not the King of the Underworld, and neither am I the Greeter of the Dead."

The girl wept softly. Chu Wanning remained silent for a while and didn't speak, waiting until she brought herself together before he spoke again. "However, I am certainly here to bring you justice."

Hearing this, the girl looked up. Though her breathing was still labored, she exclaimed in both joy and anguish, "You really are the Lord King of the Underworld!"

"....." Chu Wanning decided not to continue that subject with her and asked instead, "Do you know what you've been doing after you died?"

"I don't know...it's not clear. I only remember I was very sad, very sad. I wanted revenge...I wanted to find them...then I wanted to find him..."

When souls were first aroused, there would be many things they could not recall temporarily, but that was fine. Chu Wanning asked patiently, "Who did you want to find?"

The girl replied softly, "My husband, Chen Bo'huan."

Chu Wanning was taken back. Chen Bo'huan——wasn't that the name of the eldest son of the Chen family?

"What...is your name? Where are you from?" He asked.

Tianwen's powers filled this world of illusion behind the barrier, and most of the deceased who came within would converse with Chu Wanning truthfully and honestly. Thus, the girl responded, "This lowly one is named Luo Xianxian, from Butterfly Town."

"Before I came I reviewed the ancestry scroll of Butterfly Town, and this town only has about five hundred some households, none of which are named Luo. Who was your father?"

The girl took her time to recall the details, and the anguish in her eyes grew. "My father used to be a scholar in this town, and was an intimate friend to my father-in-law. Several years ago, he contracted an illness of the lungs and passed away. Afterwards, there was only me in the household."

"What did you die for?"

The girl was taken aback, then wept harder. "Other than death, I had no other path. They—they deceived my papa and made him leave behind the secret formula for the fragrance. They also beat me and yelled at me, threatened me, made me leave Butterfly Town. I...I'm a weak woman, where else could I have gone? I have no other relatives left in this world...the world is so big but where could I go? Other than the Land of the Dead, where else would take me in..."

Once her memories of the past life returned, her heart seemed to brim with endless sufferings and anguish, anxious to tell another. Even though Chu Wanning did not pursue any further inquiries, she slowly continued to speak on her own.

It turned out that this Luo Xianxian had lost her mother when she was very young, and through her papa's words, she'd learned that she had an elder brother. However, her brother had gone missing during a riot in the Lower Cultivation World, and they'd never seen him again, and did not know if he was alive or dead. When her brother went missing, she hadn't yet reached one year of age, had still been wrapped in swaddling clothes. Later, when she tried to remember this elder brother of hers, she still couldn't recall any impressions.

The house of Luo thus only had Xianxian and her father left, the two depending on each other to survive. They'd drifted everywhere before finally building a small house in Butterfly Town where they settled.

That year, Luo Xianxian had been five. The eldest son of the house of Chen, Chen Bo'huan, had been older than her by two years.

At the time, the house of Chen hadn't yet struck it rich. The entire family had lived squeezed together into a small earthen cottage with two rooms, and next to the low wall in the yard there was a clementine tree. When autumn came along the tree would bear fruits, and the dense branches growing past the low wall would peek into the yard of the Luo family.

Luo Xianxian had looked up with her head raised; the branches dangling with clementines were like the lanterns lit on the Lantern Festival. She was an introverted child and didn't play with others, would only sit quietly upon her little folding bench, peeling soybeans while sneaking glances at the clementines peeking overhead from Chen's yard.

The clementines were jaunty and enticing; against the sun, it was easy to imagine their full, brimming, sweet and sour, juice.

Luo Xianxian would stare at them fixedly, swallowing hard from time to time, her cheeks sore from gluttony.

However, she had never extended her hand to pick them. Her father was a mediocre and ineffectual scholar who had failed the exams; however, he'd never failed in his dignity and integrity. The soured scholar was probably broken in the head, and had constantly admonished his daughter to be a 'man of integrity'.

Luo Xianxian had already known by the age of three that wealth was not to be misused and poverty was not to move wills. Her eyes might be greedy but her hands had never come close to an inch of those clementines.

One night, taking advantage of the moonlight, Luo Xianxian sat in the yard to wash clothes, humming as she worked.

Her father's health wasn't great, and he'd long since gone to rest. Impoverished children learned to take care of households early; the little girl had her sleeves rolled up, her thin little arms soaked in the wooden bucket, cheeks puffed out as she rubbed and kneaded with vigour.

Suddenly, a hoarse, coughing noise came from the front door, and a young man, covered in blood, stumbled in, glaring at her.

The little girl was petrified, so much so that she even forgot to scream.

The young man's face was covered in blood and grime yet his brows were strong and handsome. The two of them watched each other, one big and one small, frozen in their places. Finally, the young man couldn't hang on anymore, and slowly slid down a wall and into a sitting position. His breathing was laborious as he croaked, "Give me some water."

Maybe it was because that young man didn't have the looks of a villain, or perhaps it was Luo Xianxian's own kindness, but although she was afraid, she still ran inside and filled a teapot, and brought it to the lips of the young man.

The young man didn't hold back either, and gulped down the water soundly. When he'd finished he wiped at the corners of his lips, eyes lifted to stare at Luo Xianxian's charming face. His gaze was a little intent but he didn't say a word.

He didn't speak, and so Luo Xianxian didn't speak either. She only blinked at him anxiously, staying at a distance she deemed safe, holding her hands not too close and not too far away, looking over this stranger.

"...You look a lot like someone I once knew." The young man's lips suddenly curled up, his eyes curving into crescents as he smiled coldly at her. With all that blood on his face matching the smile, he looked somewhat savage. "Especially the eyes, big and round. It just makes people want to dig them out, poke them through with a finger and swallow them whole, one by one."

Such terrifyingly sinister words were so blandly and casually said, and there was even a little laugh to go with them. Luo Xianxian shivered even harder, and covered her eyes without thinking.

"Heh, what a smart little girl," the young man said. "Keep covering your eyes like that, don't stare at me. Otherwise I can't say what my hands will do."

When he spoke, his tongue curled; his accent was from the north.

Moonlight spilled in the yard. The young man was licking his cracking lips when he suddenly spotted the clementine tree in the yard. For some reason his eyes lit up, his pupils shimmering brightly, but that glow didn't last before it faded. He rubbed his chin, then gestured.

"Little girl."

Luo Xianxian: "....."

"Pick a clementine and peel it for me."

Luo Xianxian finally moved her lips to speak, her voice tiny and quivering but without hesitation as she said, "Da gege, that fruit tree doesn't belong to my family. It's someone else's, I can't pick it."

That young man was taken aback. He seemed to remember something again and his face slowly turned dark.

"If I said pick then go pick. I want to eat clementines, so go pick them for me right now!" The last bit was growled out aggressively, like the sound had been gnawed into pieces between his teeth before they were spat out. Luo Xianxian was shaking from fright, but she still remained stubbornly where she was.

The little girl had a soft personality but her spine was as extremely rigid as her father's.

"I won't."

That young man suddenly squinted his eyes, arched his nose and his expression changed like the weather. "Foul wench! Do you know who you're talking to?!"

"If you want water, I, I'll pour you some. If you want food, there's some in the house too. But the clementine tree doesn't belong to my family, I can't pick it. Papa said, to take without asking is to steal. I'm a man of integrity, wealth is not to be misused, poverty is, is not to move gills....."

In the midst of nervousness, she misspoke and said 'gills' instead of 'wills', a tiny little girl playing pretend, her face red and puffy, stubbornly hanging on to the teachings of her father, sputtering and stuttering, dumping everything she wanted to say, yet under the intent gaze of that young man, she was already trembling so hard her feet were crossed.

That young man was silent.

If it wasn't for the wrong timing, hearing from the lips of this kid, and a little girl kid at that, the words "to take without asking is to steal", "wealth is not to be misused, poverty is not to move wills", and—"I'm a man of integrity"?? Pfft, he really wouldn't be able to hold back his laugh.

But he couldn't laugh.

Instead, there was a violent, soaring anger trampling within his chest like so many horses, stomping on his heart.

"I hate people like you the most, the so called..." Holding onto the wall, he shakily rose to his feet, words squeezing out from his lips, "Man of compassion, man of integrity, man of charity, heroes."

Under the terrified gaze of Luo Xianxian, he painstakingly shuffled his injured feet and went beneath that clementine tree. He raised his head, sniffing at the scent of clementines with greedy yearning, then a hateful crimson flashed in his eyes, and before Luo Xianxian knew what was happening, he'd climbed onto that tree and started violently shaking it, kicking it, knocking at it, beating it.

Branchfuls of clementines were soundly shaken off the tree, tumbling to the ground, rolling to the side. The smile of that young man was twisted as he yelled recklessly, "So much for taking without asking is stealing! So much for wealth is not to be misused! So much for strength is not to be exploited!"

"Da gege! What are you doing! Please stop! Dad! Papa!"

Luo Xianxian hadn't wanted to call for her father, who was weak in health, a scholar with no strength in his body. Even if he'd come out, there wasn't much he could do. Still, she was a little girl after all. Having held on to this point, she was finally scared and breaking down.

"What are you yelling for! If your dad comes out, I'll chop him down too!"

The little girl was terrified, tears welling up in her big, round eyes.

The Chen family next door had gone to visit relatives in the neighbouring village, and so no one in the family was home. There was no one around to stop this little lunatic.

The little lunatic shook until all the clementines had fallen from the tree, but even then his madness couldn't be stopped, and he stomped heavily on the ground, crushing many of the fruits. Then, with a sudden aggression and using a burst of strength from who knew where, he leapt up and flipped into the Chen's yard, found an axe, and chopped down the tree. Then he flipped back over and laughed heartily.

He laughed and laughed, then stopped abruptly and squatted down. He started spacing out, his eyes unfocused.

Suddenly, he twisted his head over and beckoned Luo Xianxian over. "Little girl, come here."

"....." Luo Xianxian didn't move. She stayed where she was, shuffling her little cloth shoes embroidered with yellow flowers.

The young man saw that she was hesitating and softened his tone, speaking with as much kindness as he could muster, "Come. I've got something good for you."

"I...I don't want to...no, I'm not coming over..." Luo Xianxian mumbled, but before she could finish her sentence, that young man erupted in rage again——

"If you don't come here right this instant, this I'm^[15] gonna go into your house and chop your dad into minced meat!"

Luo Xianxian shuddered violently and finally, little by little, she shuffled towards him.

That young man looked askance at her. "Hurry up, I ain't got time to watch you do the Yangko dance^[16]."

Luo Xianxian drew closer to him, head bowed. When she was still a few steps away, he suddenly reached his hand out and yanked her over. Luo Xianxian let out a squeal, or tried to, because before the sound could leave her mouth, it was shoved back inside by an object. The young man had stuffed a clementine in her mouth, unpeeled and unwashed, still covered in mud.

How could Luo Xianxian possibly eat a clementine with just one bite? The young man forcefully stuffed it in. The clementine ripped as it was crushed against her, juice and mud smeared over half her face. The lunatic was still cackling, squishing the fruit on her face, trying to shove it past her tightly shut lips.

"Aren't you a man of integrity? Weren't you not going to steal? Then what are you eating right now, huh? WHAT ARE YOU EATING RIGHT NOW?"

"Wuuu...no...I don't want it...papa...papa..."

"Swallow it." The young man's eyes curved into crescents, and he stuffed the last bit of fruit into Luo Xianxian's mouth. His eyes shone darkly as he said, chilling and cold, "Swallow the goddamn thing!"

The young man watched Luo Xianxian as she was forced to swallow the clementine, sobs choking from her throat as she cried for her father weakly. He was quiet for a moment and then he suddenly smiled.

That smile was more terrifying than his savage expression.

He ruffled Luo Xianxian's hair, satisfied, and said warmly as he continued to squat there, "Why call papa? Shouldn't you call da gege? Is the clementine gege gave you sweet? Is it good?"

Then he picked up another one from the ground.

This time, he didn't try to force it into her mouth. Instead he attentively peeled off the skin, even picking out the white fibres sticking on the meat before he wiped his hands, pulled out a piece and brought it to Luo Xianxian's lips. He said with a chiding, gentle voice, "If you like it then eat some more."

Luo Xianxian understood that today, she'd run into someone who was mentally disturbed. Left without any choice, she bowed her head and wordlessly munched on the clementine that the lunatic passed over. Its sweet and sour juice diffused in her throat, causing turbulent waves in her stomach...

The young man continued to squat there, feeding her clementines piece by piece, seeming to be in a good mood again, even humming a tune.

His voice was rough and coarse like a damaged basket with breeze blowing through the holes, fuzzy and unclear, but some of the words floated into Luo Xianxian's ears.

"Three four drops of petals upon the pond,
One two cries of strings rang from ashore
Youthful years before crowing be the best of years,
Hooves light horses fast,
See the ends of the world..."

"Little girl," he suddenly said.

"....."

"Tsk." He clicked his tongue and cupped Luo Xianxian's little face with his hand. "Let me take a look at your eyes."

Luo Xianxian was trembling, but without any power to retaliate, she could only allow that young man to examine her eyes thoroughly, letting those bloody fingers rub over her brows inch by inch.

"So alike," he said.

Luo Xianxian whimpered as she shut her eyes, scared that this lunatic would pick her eyes out the way he had the fruits, all on a whim.

But the young man didn't pick.

He only said to her in a somber, chilling voice, "Didn't you teach me "wealth shan't be misused, poverty shan't move wills"? Da gege has something to say to you too."

"Sob..."

"Open your eyes."

Luo Xianxian's eyes were tightly shut. That young man laughed in exasperation, and said, voice hoarse, "I won't dig out your eyes, now open them!"

"...Do you think I won't be able to poke your eyes out if you have them closed?!"

Luo Xianxian could only obey. She opened her large, round eyes. Her long, soft lashes trembled, and large beads of tears fell. The fearful and pitiful expression on her face seemed to somehow please the mysterious young man.

He suddenly loosened the hand that was squeezing her cheek. It hovered in the air for a moment, then gently patted her head.

He stared at her eyes intently, a trembling smile curling from the corner of his lips. His grin was seven parts twisted, two parts savage, and one part sorrow.

He said, "There was a man from Linyi whose heart died at twenty."

Then, done speaking, he turned around and his figure slowly disappeared into the shadows.

The only indication that there had ever been such a person, appearing in the depths of nighttime all covered in blood, was the mess left behind on the ground.

[1] forgotten your place

[2] 壽 character symbolizing fortune, specifically associated with marriage

[3] 道长: polite address for cultivators

[4] 車功 a technique for speed and lightness, including allowing one to walk on water

[5] 壽 fortune, typically associated with marriage

[6] 金童玉女 attendants of Daoist immortals with childlike appearances

[7] 海棠花 crab-apple blossom, crab-apple looks too stupid in english i cant

[8] 白帝水K - Water from Sichuan. The White Emperor reigned over the Sichuan area, which is the current story setting.

[9] “扇” and “善” both pronounced shan

[10] The groom and bride share a piece of meat, symbolizing the start of a life together

[11] The groom and bride each drink half of their cup of wine, then exchange and down the rest

[12] Where the consummation happens

[13] Metaphor for a beautiful woman

[14] [白無常] “White Impermanence” is one of the two Greeters of Death who collects deceased souls and brings them before the King of the Underworld for judgement. One black, one white, although they show up in pairs, the innocent will be collected by the white and the sinners will be collected by the black. The girl asked if CWN is the white one meaning she believes herself innocent.

[15] Orig text: 老子 aka chinese equivalent of ore-sama

[16] The Yangko dance, also called twisting Yangko dance, is a traditional Chinese folk dance commonly performed in the Northern provinces of China. ([read more](#))

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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The next morning, the Chen family came back from visiting their relatives. They noticed the clementine tree had fallen over, and its fruits spread all over the ground. There weren't a lot of residents around the area, and only the Luo family was close by. They remembered the way Luo Xianxian had looked gluttonously at the clementines, and at once concluded—

The clementines must have been stolen by that unlucky child, Luo Xianxian! Not only had she stolen, out of jealousy, she'd even chopped down the tree!

The Chen family immediately went to Scholar Luo, full of accusations. Of course Scholar Luo wasn't about to handle this kind of humiliation and he promptly called his daughter over, asking angrily if the clementines had been stolen by her.

Luo Xianxian cried as she answered it wasn't her.

Then she was asked if she'd chopped down the tree.

Luo Xianxian continued to answer that it wasn't her.

And then she was asked if she'd sneakily eaten any clementines.

Luo Xianxian didn't know how to lie, and could only answer that she had.

Before she even had time to explain, her flustered and exasperated father ordered her to kneel down. He disciplined her with a ruler in front of the Chen family, and as he beat her he said, "Raising girls is inferior to raising boys! How could you commit this kind of deceitful act at such a young age! Ridiculous! An embarrassment to your father! As your punishment, you will not be allowed to eat today. Face the wall for three days, painstakingly repent until you can start anew—"

"Papa, it wasn't me! It really wasn't me!"

"Don't you dare talk back to me!"

Nobody believed her. Although the lower cultivation world was in a disorderly state, Butterfly Town was an exception. The residents of this town had always lived simple and honest lives, and nobody even locked their doors at night. To say that a lunatic covered in blood had turned up in the middle of the night? Who would believe that?

The skin on Luo Xianxian's hands was left raw and bleeding from all the ruler's striking.

The Chen family watched on coldly. Only the oldest boy was different; he tugged on the corner of his mother's clothing, as if wanting to say something.

His mother didn't pay him any attention. Left with no choice, he furrowed his rather well proportioned face, and stood off to the side, unwilling to continue watching.

That night, Luo Xianxian, too afraid to return inside, crouched under the roof of her house and miserably carried out her punishment.

Her father was a scholar, and thievery was the most intolerable thing to him. He tended to dwell on things, and was nothing but stubborn. There was no point talking to him, as he refused to listen to reason.

After a day of hunger, Luo Xianxian was beginning to feel faint. Suddenly, a small voice called out to her, "Miss Luo."

Luo Xianxian turned around, and noticed a head with well proportioned facial features sticking out over the earthen walls. It was the boy that had tried to plead for her earlier that day, the eldest son from the house of Chen, Chen Bo'huan.

Chen Bo'huan looked around, and after making sure no one was around, he climbed over the earthen wall. He took out a hot mantou from within his robes, and stuffed it into her hand without any explanation.

"I saw you standing by the foot of this wall for the entire day, with nothing to eat. This mantou's for you, eat it fast."

"I..." Luo Xianxian was shy by nature; though she had lived here for quite a few months already, she had barely exchanged any words with the boy next door. Right now, looking at him at such close proximity, she couldn't help but back away a couple of steps, hitting her head against the wall with a bonk. She stammered, "I can't take it...Papa won't let me...He said..."

She spoke incoherently, and couldn't form any full sentences the entire time. Chen Bo'huan said, "Aiya, your father only knows how to speak like a book, why do you bother with him this much? You'll get sick from this kind of starvation; eat up, before it gets cold."

The mantou was white and tender, soft and fluffy, still hot enough to steam.

Luo Xianxian lowered her head and stared at it for a moment, and she swallowed her saliva with a gulp.

However, she really was too famished. Regardless of gentleman behaviour this or gentleman behaviour that, she grabbed the mantou and stuffed her face with it, and in no time, it was all gone.

After she finished, she looked up with her round eyes. The first full sentence she said to Chen Bo'huan was, "The clementine tree wasn't chopped down by me, and I didn't want to steal."

Chen Bo'huan was taken aback for a moment, then he slowly started to smile. "En."

"But none of them believed me..." Under his gaze that held no contempt, Luo Xianxian gradually began to open up. Her grievances, like ice and snow melting, began to pour out. She opened her mouth and let out a "Wah", and began to wail as she wiped her tears. "None of them believed me...I didn't steal...I didn't steal..."

Chen Bo'huan patted her frantically. "I know you didn't steal. Aiya, you stood under the tree everyday, never taking a single clementine, if you wanted to steal you would have done it a long time ago..."

"It wasn't me! It wasn't me!" She wailed even harder, tears and snot trickling down.

Chen Bo'huan continued to pat her. "It wasn't you, it wasn't you."

The two of them began to grow more familiar with each other just like this. Later, a homicide occurred in the neighbouring village. A couple of nights ago, a blood soaked bandit broke into a house, and demanded for a room to stay the night. The owner refused, and so the bandit killed the entire family. Then he casually slept through the night in the corpse-filled room, and didn't leave until the next day. But he didn't leave just like that. Using blood, he wrote a long and eloquent essay on the walls. He documented all the wonderful deeds that he'd done, as if he was afraid that the world wouldn't know about the existence of such a fiend.

The news spread like wildfire, and soon reached Butterfly Town. After comparing the times, it was the exact night that Luo Xianxian had met the

“lunatic-gege”.

Scholar Luo and the Chen family were all left speechless.

The two families got a lot closer after the misunderstanding was resolved. The Chen couple realized Luo Xianxian was really cute, and a hard working and thoughtful beauty. Considering their own family circumstances, it was probably difficult to find a better daughter-in-law. And thus they arranged for an engagement between Chen Bo'huan and Luo Xianxian. Once they reached adulthood, they would formally have a ceremony.

Scholar Luo thought his daughter and Chen Bo'huan were a pretty good match, and thus he happily agreed.

Time passed day by day. If Scholar Luo hadn't been interested in the art of fragrance, perhaps the two families would have led the modest but content life they had initially imagined for themselves.

If there was anyone to blame, it was Scholar Luo for creating, even accidentally, the “Hundred Butterfly Fragrance”.

The fragrance's scent was nothing special, not particularly different from the ones commonly found in town. But it had a benefit that the other fragrances did not have——

The scent lasted for a hundred days, lingering endlessly.

The Hundred Butterfly Fragrance stayed scented for a very long time, and was exactly the type of high quality and inexpensive product that every household sought after.

Scholar Luo believed in “Everything is inferior, only knowledge is superior”. Although he created the fragrance, he wasn't willing to sell it, and believed it would ruin his identity.

He wouldn't sell it, but of course someone else would have their mind on it.

Madam Chen tried to obtain the recipe from Scholar Luo, and encouraged him to open up a store, only to be rejected by him. After a few times, Madam Chen didn't want to keep making a fool of herself, so she no longer brought up the matter. However deep down in her heart, she firmly remembered this.

The year that Luo Xianxian turned fifteen, an opportunity came. Scholar Luo, who had always been sickly, contracted tuberculosis, and eventually passed away after a few months of suffering. As Luo Xianxian's mother-in-law—even though they hadn't officially married yet, the sentiments were there—she helped carry out the funeral, busying back and forth.

Luo Xianxian was moved to tears. However, she didn't realize that Madam Chen harboured hidden intentions. While she organized Scholar Luo's belongings, she quietly swiped the recipe for the perfume.

That night, Madam Chen lit up an oil lantern, full of excitement and ready to read the recipe. However after only one glance, she was left dumbfounded.

Scholar Luo's writing was like a dance between a dragon and a phoenix; the characters were written in an elegant, confident, *cursive* script. After staring at it for half a day, she still could not understand a single word.

Left without a choice, she could only quietly put the recipe back.

After a few months, after Luo Xianxian had calmed down, she invited the girl over for a meal. During their casual chatter, she “unintentionally” brought up Hundred Butterfly Fragrance.

Luo Xianxian thought to herself, the recipe had no use if it was just tucked away in the house. Madam Chen had always been kind to her; if she wanted it, she could give it to her.

So she took out her father's possessions, and even helped Madam Chen interpret the writing. Little by little, she sorted out the complex recipe.

Madam Chen was over the moon. Once she obtained the recipe, she began to plan for the opening of a fragrance powder shop with her husband.

Of course, at that time, Madam Chen still treasured this gentle and sensible future daughter-in-law. The older she got, the more beautiful she became. Even though her family had met misfortunes, her appearance was one in a hundred. Quite a few young men from the town had begun to notice her.

Complications could arise the longer they waited, Madam Chen thought to herself. They needed to take care of this matter as quickly as possible.

However, Luo Xianxian had just lost her father. According to the traditions of Butterfly Town, if both of one's parents passed away, one could not marry within three years.

But how could Madam Chen wait for three years? She thought it through and through, and came up with a solution——

That day, Luo Xianxian was braiding the hair of the youngest daughter from the Chen family. She had a close friendship with this girl. Every day it was Luo-jiejie this, and Luo-jiejie that, the youngest daughter following her around like a little tail.

Madam Luo stepped into the courtyard, and called Luo Xianxian into the inner hall. She said to her, "Xianxian, you and Bo'huan are childhood sweethearts, and also had an engagement. Now that your father has passed, you are all alone, and life has been quite difficult. You were supposed to marry into our family this year, but the three years rule has to be met, and now you can't even marry. So I thought, after these three years, how old would you be?"

Luo Xianxian lowered her head, and didn't say anything. But she was clever, and could guess at what Madam Chen was about to say next. Her cheeks began to turn pink.

Sure enough, Madam Chen continued.

"Living alone is difficult and tiring. Why not this—— Marry into our family first; we can do the ceremony behind closed doors, keep it quiet from outsiders. If anybody asks, you can tell them I'm just looking after you. This way we can carry out the customs and not be scrutinized by others. Your father below will be at ease as well. Once the three years are over, we shall have a proper ceremony in style. Is that alright?"

These words all sounded like they were all for the sake of Luo Xianxian. As someone who had no bad intentions and would therefore never imagine others to have them, she agreed.

Later, through the sales of Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, the Chen family became wealthy. They moved out of their old home, and purchased a large piece of land in town. With much building and renovations, they became a big influential family.

And Luo Xianxian thus became a shadow hidden within this big family, as someone who hardly showed her face.

Everybody in town really thought that the reason why Luo Xianxian lived with them was purely because Madam Chen was kindly looking after her. They didn't know that she and Chen Bo'huan had already been married.

Although a little unhappy about this kind of lifestyle, Luo Xianxian only thought her mother-in-law had done it to avoid rumours, and it was all for her own good, so she didn't have any complaints. Plus, Chen Bo'huan treated her

with sincerity, and their time spent together was sweet and loving. They were only waiting for the three years to pass, when everything would return to normal.

But the day of the official marriage ceremony, the day that Luo Xianxian was waiting for, never came.

The Chen family's business was flourishing, and Chen Bo'huan was quite handsome. Soon enough, it wasn't just the girls in Butterfly Town who noticed; even the daughters of rich families in the neighboring villages started eyeing the eldest Chen-gongzi. Bit by bit, Madam Chen began to waver.

When she'd arranged the engagement between the kids back then, it was because they had been a peasant family and weren't going to find any better, and so she had hurriedly laid claim to Luo Xianxian.

Who could've anticipated this reversal in fortune, that the Chen family would one day become this wildly successful? When she looked at Luo Xianxian now, she felt that the girl wasn't pretty enough, or clever enough, that she was dumb and dull like her damned dry tree-root of an old man. The more she looked, the more she found the girl irritating.

She regretted it a little.

Until Mistress Yao's appearance turned her "a little" into "completely".

Mistress Yao was the governor's pampered daughter, tomboyish and with a preference for martial attire. One day, returning from the hunt atop a fine horse, she passed by a fragrance store and stopped to look. But rather than picking out any fragrances, she instead picked out the handsome and hard-working young man inside the shop.

That young man was none other than Chen Bo'huan, Luo Xianxian's husband in all but name.

Author's Notes:

Chu Wanning (serious expression): This incident teaches us that secret engagements are not advisable. Without any legal documentation, it's very easy to cut ties, with no liability involved.

Mo Weiyu (innocent expression): Eh? I think a few chapters ago someone had a marriage ceremony with me in secret, but I can't remember clearly, who was he? I was planning on taking responsibility for this, but since he doesn't want this, then nevermind. (Smile)

Ch.21 This Venerable One Will Tell You a Story (Pt. 3)

The governor's precious daughter Yao had a spirited personality. She even forgot about food and drink once she got home, and spent all her time pestering her Papa to go ask around about this Chen Bo'huan person. Although Chen Bo'huan was already married, the ceremony had been done behind closed doors; who on the outside would know? The townspeople didn't even know about the arranged betrothal between the Luo and Chen families from way back.

And so it was that the precious mistress Yao was informed that this Chen-gongzi was "unmarried".

The governor spared no effort in looking into this person, and in the end decided that this young man Chen was a capable man with a gentle temperament and a satisfactory family situation, so he sent a messenger to the Chen couple with a marriage proposal.

On hearing this, Landlord Chen was so full of regret that his intestines near turned blue. They politely told the governor's messenger that they need some time to think it over, closed the door, and immediately started arguing with each other.

Landlord Chen yelled, "Look where your rushing got us! That broke scholar died early, so his daughter should've been in mourning for three years, if you hadn't urged them to get married ahead of time, our son could have still gotten out of it! Look at this mess now!"

Madam Chen was just as anxious. "Oh so you're blaming me now? Weren't you the one who wanted to arrange the betrothal back then? This is the governor's precious daughter we're talking about here! How could that Xian... that Luo Xianxian even hope to compare?"

The pair of old bastards argued behind closed doors til they were red in the face and out of strength, both breathing roughly across the table.

Landlord Chen asked, "What should we do? Maybe we should turn the governor down."

Madam Chen said, "...Absolutely not. Our family is counting on this precious mistress for fame and fortune."

Landlord Chen shot back angrily, "Do you really think the treasured daughter of the Yao family would be willing to be a concubine? Do you? Our son already has someone, how are we to squeeze in another? And besides, look how in love they are!"

"....." Madam Chen was quiet for a while, then her eyes lit up and she muttered, "Say, old Chen, the way I see it, no one outside our family even knows about this thing between Luo Xianxian and our son..."

There was silence for a moment while Landlord Chen stared blankly, before suddenly understanding his wife's meaning.

He was shaking a little, half from apprehension, half from excitement.

"Y-you mean..."

"If no one knows about it, then the marriage never happened," Madam Chen said. "We'll chase her out one way or another. If asking doesn't work, then we'll just use force. Everyone knows our son is yet unmarried. And do you remember that incident where she stole clementines when she was younger? As long as all of us stick to the story, even if she grows extra mouths to cry about it, who would believe her!"

Landlord Chen strode to the door to make sure it was closed tight, then sidled over. The two had been arguing like a pair of fighting cocks a mere moment ago, but now they were huddled together, scheming in quiet whispers.

Landlord Chen said, "I don't think it'll work."

"Why not?"

"Our son will never agree to it. He's liked Luo Xianxian ever since he was little, but now you want him to just up and ditch her, do you think he'll go along with that?"

Madam Chen thought for a while, then patted her husband's hand and said, "Don't you worry, I'll take care of it."

Before long, Madam Chen suddenly came down with a grave illness. It was a strange illness; the doctor couldn't find anything wrong, but she was unhinged

day in, day out, muttering nonsense and insisting that she was being possessed by a ghost.

Landlord Chen was worried sick. He invited a taoist priest who carried a horsetail whisk and an air of taoist propriety. The priest pinched his fingers together and discerned that there was something in the Chen family that meant ill towards Madam Chen, and that if not resolved, she would not live to see next year.

Chen Bo'huan was very filial, and anxiously asked, "What bears ill will toward my mother?"

The priest walked around for quite a while in an enigmatic pretension before saying it was "a beauty who never sees the sun".

Everyone in the room was shocked. One by one, the Chen brothers all turned to stare at Luo Xianxian.

Luo Xianxian was just as shocked.

Ever since she had been little, others had always said such things about her, that she was unlucky, that she brought misfortune on all those around her, that she had killed her mother at birth, then her brother, and then her father.

Now, the fingers were pointing at her again, saying that she was going to kill her mother-in-law.

Distressed, the Chen brothers took turns talking to her, asking her to leave, saying that no one outside knew that she was married, her reputation was still intact, they would give her some money and she could go find another family.

Luo Xianxian was anxious and frightened, worried that she really was the one cursing Madam Chen, and she cried day after day.

Chen Bo'huan's heart ached, watching his mother grow weaker by the day, stuck between the two; he didn't want Xianxian to leave, but also didn't want his mother to suffer. He lost weight rapidly.

Eventually, the Chen brothers had had enough. One day, while their eldest brother was out, they went to find their sister-in-law. Luo Xianxian was in the greenhouse making Hundred Butterfly Fragrance when they found her. They rushed in and smashed all her tools. She was covered in the powder; it was as if the heavy scent soaked into her bones, impossible to wash out.

The brothers surrounded her at first, sermonizing about principles and such, "women's duty" this, "parents before wife" that. But Luo Xianxian was resilient; she was timid but stubborn, crying that she didn't want to leave, begging them to please think of another way.

The second Chen brother grew agitated. He stepped up and slapped her, demanding, "You harbinger of disaster, you're going to curse our mother to death! If there was another way, would your dad have died? Would your mom? What about your brother, living or dead unknown?"

With his one hit, the others took their cue, rushing in as well and closing in around her with punches and kicks, yelling "get the fuck out", "unlucky pest", "bringer of death".

These brothers were of one mind with their mother, and have been in on her plan since long ago. Jumping on this chance while the eldest brother was out, they worked together to drive Luo Xianxian out, threatening to beat her every day if she dared to come back—she had no family anyway, even if they beat her to death, no one would care to get justice for her.

That night, it was snowing. Luo Xianxian was tossed out into the snow, her entire body covered in blue and purple; one shoe had even fallen off.

She crawled forward slowly, choked with sobs like the cries of a dying cub.

The night grew deeper. With the snow falling like this, everyone was staying inside. She crawled in the endless snow, not knowing where to go, not knowing where she *could* go.

The Chen brothers were right.

She had no family, no father, no brother, no one to turn to, no one who would shelter her.

This pure white world was vast, but it had no place for her.

Her body was frail to start with, and she wasn't wearing much when she had been chased out. Shivering, her legs and feet quickly became numb and lost all feeling.

She crawled to the outskirts of the town, to the temple of the ghost mistress, taking shelter inside, curling into herself, lips blue from the cold, heart cold from the sorrow.

She looked up at the painted, splendid clay idol, and couldn't help the tears rolling down her cheeks. She thought about the customs of the lower cultivation realm, where marriages should be witnessed by a master of ceremonies.

But back then, all she'd had was a red flower tucked behind her ear when she, smiling, had knelt across from Chen Bo'huan and bowed to the ground.

Had the ceremony behind closed doors been no more than a dream, had the blushing face in the copper mirror that day been a mere reverie born of her deepest desires.

She knelt before the statue of the ghost mistress, dragging her frozen body that grew heavier by the minute, kowtowing again and again, tears mixed with laughter.

"Cording hair to become husband and wife, conjugal love never to be doubted. Joy...in this...eve..."

She grew dizzy, vision blurring.

It was as if a sheen of moonlight lit up a mirage of that year, in the yard, when she'd cried: "It wasn't me, it wasn't me, I didn't steal the clementines."

But repeated rumor becomes fact, gossip is a frightful thing; no one would listen to her side of the story.

Even now, she knew that, even if she were to go and cry to people, even if she were to swear up and down that she was Chen Bo'huan's properly wedded wife, no one would believe her. She was still the little girl by the low wall that no one would listen to, just the same as back then.

Nothing had changed.

At least that time, there was still someone who would climb over the wall and press a steamy white mantou into her hands, and say to her, "You must be hungry, hurry and eat."

But...where was that person now...

When he returned and couldn't find her, would he fret, or would he secretly breathe a sigh of relief because his mother wouldn't be cursed by her anymore?

Luo Xianxian curled up in the temple, the tears she shed slowly drying. She whispered, "Mistress of Ceremonies, I want to be with him. I'm his wife... there

was no one to witness our wedding... you are a ghost mistress, and don't deal with living people, but I... I can only... I can only talk to you..."

Her last words came out a broken sob. "I didn't lie..."

I didn't lie.

The snow continued falling without a sound in the long, silent night.

The next day, some townspeople passing by the temple found Luo Xianxian's ice-cold body.

Author's Notes:

Chu Wanning: Don't block my way, let me kill their entire family, if the sect leader asks it's on me!

Mo Weiyu: (grabs onto) Your honor, please calm down. Your honor, please return to the bench.

Ch.22 This Venerable One's Shizun is About to Get Angry

Chu Wanning, having heard this much, was already livid. He wished only that he could withdraw the willow vine and direct it with vigor toward the Chen couple instead. But he couldn't open his eyes to curse them out just yet, because the restoration illusion would disappear immediately if he were to do so. A ghost could only be trapped by the Truth Restoration Barrier once; if interrupted, he would never be able to hear the rest of what Luo Xianxian had to say.

So he could only bear with the burning rage as he listened to the rest of Luo Xianxian's story.

After death, her spirit went to the Underworld, numb and disoriented.

She remembered only a lady dressed in resplendent colors, who looked quite like the ghost mistress in the temple, standing before her and asking in a soothing voice, "You and Chen Bo'huan could not lay together in life, but do you wish to be buried together in death?"

She answered in a panic, "I do... I do!"

"Then I will have him come keep you company right away, alright?"

Luo Xianxian almost blurted out an eager agreement without thinking, but suddenly remembered something, and paused. "Am I dead?"

"Yes. I am the Ghost Mistress of Ceremonies of the Underworld, I can bestow you a good match, fulfill your longtime wish."

Luo Xianxian said in a daze, "Then, if he comes to keep me company, will he... also die?"

"Yes. But the heavens are compassionate, life or death is insignificant, merely a closing of the eyes, what's the difference?"

Chu Wanning thought to himself that, as expected, this ghost mistress used trickery to lure people into making wishes on the lives of others, truly an abominable deity.

Although Luo Xianxian had died a wrongful death, she was not a malicious ghost. She shook her head repeatedly. "No, don't kill him, it wasn't his fault."

The ghost mistress gave a melancholic smile. "Such kindness, but what will you get in return?" But it didn't try to change her mind; as a deity, coaxing people into making malevolent wishes was fine, but coercion was not. Gradually, its figure faded away and its voice became blurry.

"The soul returns on the seventh day^[1]. When you go back to the living world on the seventh day, go see what the Chen family is up to. Then, I will come ask you again, and see if you are still without regrets at that time."

Seven days later, on the day of return.

Luo Xianxian's spirit regained awareness and returned to the world of the living.

She followed the familiar roads to the Chen Manor, eager to see her husband one last time.

Unexpectedly, the Chen Manor was festively adorned with lanterns and banners, the reception area was piled high with betrothal gifts^[2], and there was a massive "Xi"^[3] character in the main hall. Madam Chen's entire face was glowing, no sign of any illness whatsoever, as she smilingly directed servants to pack the betrothal gifts with red silk and ornate decorations.

Who was... getting married?

Who was... preparing betrothal gifts?

Who was... sparing no expense, how very grand.

Who was...

She weaved between the busy crowd, listening to the drone of voices.

"Madam Chen, congratulations on the engagement of your son with Governor Yao's daughter, when's the engagement feast?"

"Madam Chen is truly blessed."

"Mistress Yao really is the Chen family's lucky star! The betrothal was just settled, and Madam Chen is already looking much better."

"Your son and Mistress Yao are as gold and jade, a match made in heaven. I'm so envious, hahahaha."

Your son...your son...

Which son?

Who is getting married with the daughter of the Yao family?

Frantically, she roamed the familiar halls and yard, looking for that familiar silhouette between the chatter and laughter.

She found it.

Chen Bo'huan stood before the peonies in the rear hall, his face wan, cheeks sunken. But he was dressed in red—not wedding robes, but Butterfly Town's traditional butterfly-embroidered red robes, worn by the son-in-law when he goes to the bride's house to propose^[4].

He was...going to propose...?

All of these lavish gifts, full of gold, silver, and pearls, all of it had been prepared by him... by Chen Bo'huan, her husband, for the daughter of the Yao

family?

She suddenly recalled when the two of them had got married.

There had been nothing, just two people, one heart, and nothing else.

No master of ceremonies, no bridesmaid or best man, no gifts. The Chen family had not yet prospered, and didn't even have so much as a single decent set of jewelry. He had walked to the clementine tree in the yard that they'd planted together and plucked a delicate blossom, carefully tucking it in her hair.

She had asked him, "How do I look?"

Beautiful, he had said. Then he had been silent for a moment before stroking her hair apologetically. "You deserve better."

Luo Xianxian had smiled and said she didn't mind.

Chen Bo'huan had said to her, that when he formally married her in three years time, he would definitely make it up to her with a grand ceremony, and everyone would be invited. He would go pick her up with a big sedan carried by eight men, adorn her in gold and silver, and the reception would be filled with betrothal gifts.

The promise made that year rang in her ears. Here and now, the ceremony was grand, and everyone was invited.

But he was marrying somebody else.

Anger and sorrow washed over her. Luo Xianxian screamed as she tore at the red silks and brocades in the room.

But, being a ghost, she couldn't touch any of it.

As if sensing something, Chen Bo'huan looked back, gaze hollow as he stared blankly at the silks in the room, drifting despite there being no wind.

His little sister walked over. There was a white jade hairpin in her hair; she was mourning secretly for someone.

She said, "Da-ge^[5], please go eat something, you haven't eaten properly for days, and you still have to travel to the governor's residence to propose later, your body won't hold up like this."

Chen Bo'huan suddenly asked out of the blue, "Xiao-mei^[6], do you hear someone crying?"

"...Huh? No? Da-ge, are you..." She grit her teeth and didn't finish the thought. Chen Bo'huan continued to stare at the place where the silks drifted.

"How is Mother, is she in a good mood? Has she recovered from her illness?"

"...Da-ge."

"...It's good that she's recovered." Chen Bo'huan stood there spacing out for a while, then mumbled to himself, "I've already lost Xianxian, I can't lose Mother too."

"Da-ge, please go eat..."

Luo Xianxian cried, screamed, held her head and wailed in anguish. Don't...don't go...don't leave...

Chen Bo'huan said, "...Alright."

The exhausted figure turned a corner and disappeared.

Luo Xianxian stood there alone in a daze, fat droplets of tears rolling down her cheeks. By chance, the voices of the Chen brothers who had caused her death drifted over, the second and youngest brothers whispering to one another.

“Mother is overjoyed, *sigh*, things are finally falling into place.”

“You don’t say? It took half a year of pretending to be sick to finally force that unlucky pest out, how could she not be happy?”

The youngest brother clicked his tongue, then suddenly said, “I can’t believe she just up and died though. We only threw her out, it’s not like we wanted to kill her. How stupid was she, did she not even know to go find help?”

“Who knows, maybe she’s just thin-skinned like her sourpuss father. It’s not our fault that she died. Mother may have duped her, but things are difficult for us too. Just think about it, between the governor’s daughter and some peasant girl, only an idiot would choose her. Besides, if we offend the precious daughter of the Yaos, things won’t end well for us.”

“You’re right, she’s just a dumbass. If she wants to freeze to death, that’s on no one.”

The words drifted to her ears.

Only in death did Luo Xianxian finally understand that the so-called “bringer of misfortune” just meant that she was poor and low-status, and couldn’t compare with the governor’s honored daughter.

Only an idiot would choose the peasant girl.

She finally lost it.

She returned to the temple of the ghost mistress, heart filled with hatred and resentment.

She had died there, weak and helpless. She returned there now, bitter and stone-hearted.

She had once been so kind and good-natured, but now she called up all the hatred in her lifetime, and all the wickedness in her character that she had never let loose before. She screamed herself hoarse, eyes red, soul quivering.

She screamed, “I, Luo Xianxian, am willing to give up my soul to become a malicious ghost, I beg the Ghost Mistress only for vengeance! I want the entire Chen family—to die miserably!!! I want her... I want that mother-in-law of mine, who is worse than a beast, to kill her sons with her own hands! All of them!!! I want Chen Bo’huan to come keep me company in hell!!! To be buried together with me!!! I refuse to accept this!! I hate! I HATE!!!!”

On the shrine, the clay idol lowered its eyelids, the corner of its lips curving into a smirk.

A voice echoed inside the temple.

“Your worship has been accepted, and your wish will be fulfilled. Henceforth you are a malicious ghost—go forth and slaughter—all who have wronged you—”

A piercing, blood-red light flashed, and Luo Xianxian remembered nothing after that.

But Chu Wanning already knew what happened next. The ghost mistress controlled the malicious ghost Luo Xianxian to possess Madam Chen and murder the Chen family one by one.

And the reason Chen Bo'huan was in that red coffin dug up at the mountain was also to fulfill Luo Xianxian's wish—"I want Chen Bo'huan to be buried together with me". On top of that, it had intentionally placed the coffin where he and his new wife were going to build their house to both curse and avenge.

As for the scent inside Chen Bo'huan's coffin, it was that of the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance that had been on Luo Xianxian's body when she died. The coffin was filled with both strong resentful energy and heavy fragrance because Luo Xianxian's soul slept inside with Chen Bo'huan.

Luo Xianxian had no family left. When such a person dies, they are customarily cremated rather than buried. Thus, she no longer had a body, and could only take on her form inside the ghost mistress's coffin. Back then, when Chu Wanning had split open the coffin with a whip, Luo Xianxian's soul had lost its shelter and scattered, temporarily unable to reconvene. That was the reason why the coffin's resentful energy was strong when closed, but faint once opened.

Still, in the illusory realm, why were all the corpses matched in pairs except for Chen Bo'huan, who was matched with a paper ghost bride?

Chu Wanning pondered for a moment, and figured it out:

The ghost mistress wouldn't break its own promise; that ghost bride was meant to be Luo Xianxian's "corporeal body", or a medium in other words, since only Luo Xianxian could be buried together with Chen Bo'huan.

Everything became clear.

Chu Wanning looked at the helpless girl in the illusion. He wanted to say something, but didn't know what to say.

Yuheng Elder really was bad with words — everything he said came out stiff — so the silence stretched on, and he ended up saying nothing after all.

The girl stood in the endless darkness, her soft but bright eyes round.

Chu Wanning looked at her eyes, and suddenly didn't have the heart to bear it anymore. He wanted to leave, unable to bear another glance. He was just about to open his eyes and leave the Truth Restoration Barrier when the girl suddenly spoke.

"Yanluo [7]-gege, th-there's something else I wanted to tell you."

Chu Wanning: "...Mn."

The girl lowered her head and started crying into her hands. Softly, she said, "Yanluo-gege, I don't know what I did afterwards, but, I...I really don't want to get my husband killed. I don't want to be a malicious ghost. Really..."

"I didn't steal the clementines, I really am Chen Bo'huan's wife, and my whole life, I really, really never wanted to harm anyone."

"I really didn't want to hurt anyone, please, I beg you, please believe me."

Her trembling voice was broken with sobs.

"I...didn't...lie..."

I didn't lie.

Why is it that my whole life, hardly anyone ever believed me.

She sobbed miserably. Chu Wanning's voice rang out in the darkness. He didn't say much, but it was without hesitation.

"Mn."

Luo Xianxian's small body jolted.

Chu Wanning said, "I believe you."

Luo Xianxian tried to wipe away her tears but couldn't stop crying. In the end, she covered her tear-streaked face with her hands and bowed deeply toward the person she couldn't see in the darkness.

Chu Wanning opened his eyes.

He said nothing for a long while.

Time passed differently inside the barrier than it did in reality. He was inside for a long time, but it was a mere instant to those on the outside. Mo Ran hadn't arrived yet, and the remaining members of the Chen family were still watching him apprehensively.

Chu Wanning suddenly put away the willow vine, and spoke toward Madam Chen, "I will voice your grievances, you can sleep now."

Madam Chen stared blankly with blood-red eyes, then suddenly collapsed to the ground with a thud, unconscious.

Chu Wanning lifted his head again, his gaze sweeping across Landlord Chen's face and then landing on the youngest son. His voice was flat and cold.

"I will ask one last time." He spoke slowly, clearly enunciating each word. "You really do not know whose voice that was?"

Ch.23 This Venerable One Couldn't Stop Him

The youngest son quivered uncontrollably, both legs shaking as he looked up at his father.

Landlord Chen's eyes darted left and right; after a while, he insisted, "D... don't know it. D-don't recognize it!"

Chu Wanning's face was cold like frost. He spoke in a low voice, "Liar."

He had a severe appearance to begin with; now, with his eyebrows lowered and an aura of fury, he looked even more murderous, even scarier than a malicious ghost.

Landlord Chen unconsciously took two steps back. Suddenly, Chu Wanning struck the ground with Tianwen, and sparks danced from the vine as leaves flew into the air. Landlord Chen promptly fell on his ass.

"Was the Hundred Butterfly Fragrance really made by your family? Was that your eldest son's first marriage? Does Luo Xianxian ring a bell? Just how shameless are you, at this ripe old age?!"

Landlord Chen's mouth opened, closed, then opened again, but couldn't manage a single word in the end as his face turned from ashen to scarlet.

The young daughter of the Chen family, who had been cowering off to the side this whole time, heard the name "Luo Xianxian" and immediately started crying.

She stumbled over to kneel before her mother, shaking that unconscious body. "Luo-jie [8]! Luo-jie, was it all you? I know you were wronged, that you can't accept it, but please I beg you, if only for me, please spare my family...Luo-jie..."

Chu Wanning leaned over, Tianwen glowing golden in his hand, and used its hilt to lift Landlord Chen's face.

He had a phobia of touching people he found disgusting; it gave him goosebumps.

"Do you really think I can't tell when someone's lying to me?" He spoke coldly, staring into Landlord Chen's face and seeing his own reflected in those frightened eyes.

It is indeed an unlikeable face, cold and harsh, like a blade covered in frost. But so what.

Yuheng of the Night Sky never needed affection from other people.

"Daozhang, Daozhang, Sisheng Peak sent you, and I'm the client, how could you pry into my private business like this, I——"

Chu Wanning said, "Fine, I'll get out of your business then. You can die."

"Wait! Waitwaitwait! You can't——"

"I can't?" Danger flickered in Chu Wanning's narrowed eyes. "I can't what?"

"I'm...you're...you..."

"If someone like you were a disciple of my sect," Chu Wanning said as he stroked Tianwen. "I'd whip you bloody and snap your bones right here."

Hearing that, Landlord Chen finally gave up on trying to play dumb. Seeing Chu Wanning's vicious demeanor, without a hint of the compassion one would expect from a cultivator, his legs began to shake involuntarily and he knelt down, throwing all self-respect out the window to wail, "Daozhang, w-we had no other choice, we couldn't afford to offend the governor's daughter! We, we were so worried we could hardly eat, Daozhang——"

He reached out to hug Chu Wanning's thighs while wailing.

Chu Wanning's phobia flared up. Seeing that Landlord Chen was about to touch himself, he brought the willow vine down without a second thought, exclaiming in disgust, "Don't touch me!"

"Aah!" The back of his hand got lashed by Tianwen, and even though there was no spiritual energy behind the strike, Landlord Chen still howled in pain, shouting, "Unbelievable! Sisheng Peak's cultivator beats up commonfolk!"

"You——!"

When Mo Ran, supporting the two invalids, stepped into the Chen Manor, the sight that greeted him was that of Landlord Chen crying snottily where he was kneeling on the ground, pointing at Chu Wanning with a shaky finger, yelling, "Which other sect does that? Your Sisheng Peak took the fee, and, and not only did you not protect the client, y-you attacked me instead! It's so, it's so —very shameless! I-I'm gonna tell everyone! I'll announce it to the world! I-I'll make sure everyone knows about your sect's...your sect's attitude! I'll destroy your sect's reputation, and make sure you never get paid another copper!"

Chu Wanning snarled, "So what if you have money? Does money allow you to flip right and wrong, to repay kindness with cruelty? Does money let you do whatever you want, break all your promises?"

The Chen family's youngest son spoke up timidly from the side, "It's not like we killed that Luo Xianxian, we just knocked her around a bit and chased her out, she's the one that didn't want to live, it's not our fault she didn't look for shelter from the snow, can you blame us for that? We didn't kill anyone, you

can't just point fingers as you please just because you're some mighty cultivator."

His words were extremely crafty. Technically, the Chens hadn't broken any laws; even if Chu Wanning were to drag them to court, at most the official might rebuke them for being heartless and dishonest, but none of them would be convicted of anything.

"I didn't kill uncle, but uncle died because of me.^[9] Well you've certainly cleaned up after yourselves."

Chu Wanning's hand, clenched around the willow vine, shook with anger.

Landlord Chen, that old weasel, had already picked up his wits from where they had been scattered by the initial scare. He had been afraid that Chu Wanning would ditch them without taking care of the ghost before, but thinking about it again, this barbarous Daozhang was still sent by Sisheng Peak. As the foremost sect of the lower cultivation realm, since they'd already collected the fee, they would definitely finish the job, that was common knowledge.

Once he came to this realization, he stopped being quite so afraid.

He held onto his own hoof with a tiny cut on it, all tears and snot as he cried, "Cleaned up? Us Chens, we've never done anything heinous, no murder and no arson. If Luo Xianxian didn't want to live, how was that any of our fault? I-if you don't properly exorcise this ghost today, I'll go to Sisheng Peak and file a complaint about you immediately! Who does things like you people? If you take someone's money you gotta take care of their problems, how do you not understand something that basic, and you—"

Before he'd even finished, Chu Wanning took his own wallet and threw it on the ground before him without blinking. "Your payment to the sect, I've returned in full. As for complaining, feel free!"

Tianwen glowed brightly, willow leaves sharp as knives.

Caught off guard, Landlord Chen yelped and squealed, covering his head and scurrying about like a rat, even dragging his own daughter over to block the lashes in his frenzy.

Luckily, Chu Wanning was a practiced hand at whipping people, and Tianwen was one with his mind, the willow vine pulling back immediately to avoid hitting the Chen daughter before circling around and heading directly for Landlord Chen's face. Immediately, there was a loud shriek, and blood splattered instantly.

Landlord Chen hadn't expected Chu Wanning to be so completely unfazed by his posturing, and his air of arrogance melted instantly into a puddle of mud, leaving him scared shitless as he fled and wailed, "Wait wait wait hold the whip! Hold the whip! Daozhang! Daozhang I was just talking nonsense! Just nonsense! Ah! Daozhang spare me! Aiyo please I'm begging you, I'm getting on in years, I can't bear this! Daozhang have mercy, it was our fault! It was our fault!"

Chu Wanning wasn't even listening to him. His chest was stuffy with anger, phoenix eyes harshly narrowed as Tianwen danced in the air and Landlord Chen rolled around on the ground in pain, crying snottily.

Mo Ran stood at the gate, stunned: "....."

He had never seen Chu Wanning whip a commoner with Tianwen before, and so ruthlessly too, as if he was whipping a beast, the willow vine moving so fast it was barely visible.

What kinda mess was this? The contractor beating up the client, whether in the upper or lower cultivation realm, would definitely destroy that cultivator's

reputation for good. No matter how bad Chu Wanning's temper was, or how much he let his heart rule his head, how could he have gone so far as to commit this big of a blunder?

This was way more serious than his "thieving and debauchery".

Shi Mei's face was pale from shock. He pulled at Mo Ran in a panic. "H-hurry and stop Shizun!"

Mo Ran handed the still unconscious Chen-Yao—that is, the treasured daughter of the Yao family—over to Shi Mei, and stepped forward to grab Chu Wanning's wrist, alarmed and apprehensive. "Shizun—you—what are you doing?"

Chu Wanning was in a terrible mood, brows furrowed. He bellowed, "Let go."

"Shizun, this is against the rules——"

"As if I need you to tell me? Which of Sisheng Peak's seven hundred and fifty rules do I not know better than you? Let go!"

Mo Ran raised his voice. "Then why aren't you stopping?"

Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting his breath with him, abruptly ripping his hand away instead, and another lash landed ruthlessly on Landlord Chen.

"Shizun!!"

Chu Wanning growled, eyes frosty, "Get lost!"

Landlord Chen saw that Mo Ran looked handsome and amiable, definitely a good person, and so hurriedly crawled over, cowering behind Mo Ran and tugging at the corner of his clothing. "Daozhang, please talk to your Shizun, I, my old bones, even if I was wrong, even if I was wrong, my old bones can't take this kind of beating..."

But, contrary to his expectations, when Mo Ran turned around and saw his snot and tears- covered face, he felt not pity but disgust, moving quickly away with an "Ah" and muttering in disdain, "Don't touch me."

"....." Landlord Chen saw that this one could not be relied upon, and his gaze moved on to Shi Mei, who was helping Chen-Yao into a chair not too far away. Holding onto his last bit of hope, he crawled toward Shi Mei, wailing and crying.

"Daozhang, Daozhang, please show some kindness, show some mercy, I know I was wrong, it was my bad, all my bad, please I beg you please talk to your Shizun, I was wrong, I admit my fault...I...I...I'll do whatever you say, just please don't hit me anymore, I'm old, my body can't bear it...can't bear it..."

He cried pitifully, genuinely begging for his life as he crawled to Shi Mei's side and tugged at his clothes.

"....." Shi Mei was filled with pity, and turned to implore Chu Wanning. "Shizun, since the old man already knows he's wrong, please show some mercy and spar——"

Chu Wanning: "Out of the way."

Shi Mei: "....."

Chu Wanning said harshly, "Did you not hear me!?"

Shi Mei shuddered in fear and moved out of the way.

Tianwen ripped through the air with a woosh, headed directly for Landlord Chen, who covered his head with both arms and let out a frightened cry. The sound was really too pitiful, and Shi Mei couldn't help but step back in front, blocking the hit for him.

The lash landed resoundingly.

Shi Mei moved too fast; Chu Wanning tried to pull back, but it was too late.

Droplets of blood flew. In his weakened state, Shi Mei promptly fell to his knees from the strike. He covered his delicate cheek, but couldn't stop the blood trickling out from between his fingers...

Author's Notes:

Forum category: World of Relationships

OP ID: Wise monarch of this generation Mo Weiyu 

Question: Ex-boyfriend (sort of counts as) accidentally struck the man of my dreams, what to do? Urgent, waiting online for an answer.

Location: Butterfly Town, Chen Manor

Post 1: This depends on if OP wants to get back with the ex-boyfriend, or if OP wants to pursue the man of your dreams.

Post 2: Beat up the ex, ex's favorability minus 10, white moonlight's favorability plus 10. Pretend you saw nothing, ex's favorability doesn't change, white moonlight's favorability minus 10. OP's gotta decide on the game plan yourself.

Post 3: Self-destruct and play dead kid.

Post 4: I'm pretty curious, what does (sort of counts as) mean? How can someone sort of count as an ex-boyfriend? Could it be that OP used force?

Post 5: Choose to forgive him of course.

Post 6: Our shop sells Heavenly Fragranced Lubrication Oil, marriage between yin and yang [10], secret to dual cultivation. If there is a need for it, please add 48481438 as a friend. Contact person, Ms Wang of Sisheng Peak.

Ch.24 This Venerable One Declares Cold War on Him

>>uh lil bit gory toward the end

For a moment, everyone was silent, and only Landlord Chen's sobs could be heard.

Shi Mei's head was lowered, hand covering his cheek, but his eyes were earnest when he looked up at Chu Wanning. "Shizun, please stop this. If you keep going, it's Sisheng Peak that's going to get the blame..."

Mo Ran's soul was about to fly out of his mouth. He might be a reprobate, but he was still utterly devoted to Shi Mei. In this reborn life, he had sworn to himself to treat Shi Mei carefully and to protect him well, but it had only been a couple of days and Shi Mei was already injured and lashed, how could this be!

He didn't even have it in him to settle the score with Chu Wanning right now, hurrying instead to Shi Mei's side to check on the wound on his cheek.

Shi Mei said softly, "I'm okay..."

"Let me see anyway."

"It's really nothing."

Shi Mei tried to resist, but Mo Ran still managed to pull the hand covering the wound away.

His pupils contracted instantly.

It was a deep gash, raw and bloody, stretching all the way to his neck, blood still running...

Mo Ran saw red. He bit his lip and glared for a long time before whipping around to yell at Chu Wanning, "Are you quite done yet?!"

Chu Wanning, face gloomy, was silent. He did not apologize or approach, only standing there rooted to the same spot, holding Tianwen without channeling any spiritual energy.

"....."

Mo Ran felt like there were countless frenzied demons in his chest.

Who could tolerate their beloved person, who had already died once in a past life, suffering time and again like this?

He and Chu Wanning stared each other down, neither backing off, neither giving in. Mo Ran's eyes began to become bloodshot; he'd hated Chu Wanning for so many years that the hatred had already seeped all the way into his bone marrow—why was this person *always* going against him!

Back when he had first joined the sect, he had done something wrong and nearly gotten whipped to death by Chu Wanning. Later, when Shi Mei had been injured, Chu Wanning, who only had three disciples in his entire life, merely stood and watched. Then, Shi Mei died, Sisheng Peak was destroyed, and Mo Weiyu became the sole overlord of the cultivation world, every person under the sun grovelling before him. Only Chu Wanning had stood against him at every turn, getting in his way left and right, stabbing him in the conscience—a constant reminder that no matter how mighty Emperor Taxian-jun was, underneath it all he was just a lunatic abandoned by everyone who was close to him.

Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning...

In life and in death, it was always him!

The two of them were still dressed in matching wedding robes, red and red, face to face, but it was as if the space between them was split by a gaping chasm.

Chu Wanning finally put Tianwen away.

Landlord Chen let out a huge sigh of relief, and knelt in front of Shi Mei, kowtowing nonstop. "So kind, so kind, the good Sir is truly a living buddha, our savior, thank you for saving my entire family Sir, thank you Sir, thank you Sir."

It always ended up like this.

He was the one who took care of the evil spirit, but he was also the one who dealt the vicious lash. Chu Wanning did what he was supposed to but also what he was not supposed to, and in the end someone else was the compassionate savior, and he was the villain.

It had always been this way

He was ill-tempered, he was already resigned to it.

He didn't regret it, either.

Having accidentally whipped his own disciple, of course he felt bad about it, but he had a thin face and couldn't bring himself to go up and say some warm, gentle words, so he walked away and went to stand before the young daughter of the Chen family instead.

The little girl looked at him and subconsciously stepped backwards in fear, quivering.

Of the entire Chen family, she was the only one with any kindness. Chu Wanning softened his tone. "Your mother suffered ghost possession, and her lifespan has been reduced by at least twenty years. If she doesn't repent and continues being immoral, she will be plagued by negative energy and die even sooner. When she wakes, tell her to handcraft a memorial tablet for Miss Luo using red peachwood, and clearly acknowledge her status thereon. Luo Xianxian was Chen Bo'huan's properly wedded wife, this fact that your family has kept hidden for years must also be made public to fulfill her life's wish."

He paused, then handed her a scripture book.

"Additionally, your whole family must kneel and recite the 'Incantation of Deliverance' three times a day to help Miss Luo's soul find peace and purge the spirits haunting your family. This must be done for ten years without stop, or else Miss Luo will return for vengeance."

The little girl's voice shook as she said, "...Yes, th-thank you Daozhang..."

Chu Wanning turned to glare at Landlord Chen and his son, gaze sharp as a snow-covered dagger. "When Chen-Yao awakens, the two of you must tell her everything and let her make her own decision. If you try to hide anything at all, I'll rip out both your tongues!"

These two were no more than posturing cowards who dared not put up any resistance now that things had come to this. They both prostrated on the ground, swearing up and down to follow every instruction.

"As for Hundred Butterfly Fragrance, it was created by Mr. Luo alone, but you shameless lot claimed it as your own formula. You know what you have to do, I will waste no more breath on you." Chu Wanning swept his sleeves and made to leave.

"W-we'll definitely go make corrections in the store and clarify that this fragrance was made by...by Mr. Luo..."

After everything was taken care of, Chu Wanning instructed Mo Ran to take Chen-Yao inside so as to draw out the poison.

Although Mo Ran held hatred in his heart, he knew well that in his youth he was still more respectful than defiant toward Shizun, so he did not protest, only squeezing Shi Mei's hand and whispering, "Go take care of your face and stop the bleeding. I'll take her inside."

There was still a big red "Xi" character in the eldest Chen son's room. Everything had happened so fast that they'd probably forgotten to take it down in the rush. At this time, with Chen Bo'huan already turned into powder, it looked exceedingly mocking.

Chen-Yao was collateral damage in this ridiculous farce riddled with avarice. What would she choose when she woke up?

As a commoner, she wasn't as tenacious as Shi Mei. Chu Wanning drew out the poisoned blood and fed her a pill in silence. The whole time, Mo Ran stood to the side holding a basin of water and handing over towels, but the two of them did not speak to one another, did not even so much as look at one another.

As he was leaving, Chu Wanning's gaze swept past the wall with indifference before suddenly realizing something, gaze shifting back to peer at the poem hanging on the wall.

The columns of letters were in regular script, neat and upright; the ink had not been dry for long, and the edges of the paper had not yet begun to yellow.

Written was—

Hands of a delicate tint
Pour golden wine
The city all in spring, and she,
the willow behind the palace wall
And east wind, full of malice
Brought thin joy
And a skein of sorrows—
Years of separation—
Wrong, wrong, wrong

Spring still spring
It's we, without reason, waste away
Tears streak rough, stain silks
Peach blossoms fall
Your room by the pond, empty—
What good our vows have stood like mountains?
With even letters barred—
And nothing, nothing, nothing [11]

Chu Wanning's heart suddenly felt stifled. The writing was neat and careful, signed by Chen Bo'huan, the three characters glaringly conspicuous.

Chen-gongzi had married the daughter of the Yao family against his wish, and could only keep the misery in his heart to himself. Had he spent the final days of his life standing by the window, brush in hand, helpless but to transcribe 《Chai Tou Feng》 [12], an ode to loss and partings?

He didn't want to remain at the Chen Manor even a moment longer. Ignoring the searing pain in his shoulder, he turned and left.

Chu Wanning and Shi Mei were both injured, unfit to ride back to Sisheng Peak right away, and Chu Wanning especially disliked travelling by sword, so they decided to stay the night at an inn. This way they could also go take a look at the temple the next day, to ensure that things would be properly taken care of.

Even though the demons and corpses had been pulverized by Chu Wanning's "Wind", it was still only their bodies that had been destroyed, not their spirits. There was no harm in staying a few days to make sure that nothing had slipped past to continue causing trouble.

Chu Wanning walked ahead in silence, his two disciples following behind. Shi Mei seemed to have suddenly remembered something, and asked, "A-Ran, the clothes you and Shizun are wearing...what...what's going on?"

Mo Ran was taken aback before remembering that he and Shizun were still wearing the wedding robes. He was deathly afraid that Shi Mei might misunderstand, and hurriedly made to take it off.

"This...uhm, the illusion from before, don't think too much of it, I..."

Halfway through his words, he took another look and realized that, since Shi Mei had also been dragged through the ghost wedding, he too was wearing wedding robes. It was just that his had a different design, and didn't look too recognizable due to the rips and tears.

But no matter what, it was still wedding robes.

Standing side by side with Shi Mei like this, he could imagine that it was Shi Mei whose hands he had held back then in the ghost mistress's illusion, who he had bowed with, who he had shared the wine with.

He didn't want to take it off anymore, and stared at Shi Mei in a daze.

Shi Mei smiled warmly. "What is it? You didn't finish your sentence."

Mo Ran mumbled, "...It's nothing."

Chu Wanning was a few steps ahead of them. It was unclear how much he'd heard, but he stopped and turned around.

The sky was starting to brighten. After a night of commotion, the first light of daybreak emerged from the horizon, the sun crimson like a torn and bleeding heart struggling out from the abyss of darkness, painting the skies in splendid colors.

Chu Wanning stood, backlit, as the end of the long night grew bright, as the rising sun lit up the clouds.

He stood sideways, wedding robes red like blood, the rising sun casting a golden halo behind him, blurring the expression on his face.

Suddenly, spiritual energy surged forth, ripping the wedding robes into pieces.

Fragments of red fluttered like so many petals of wilting haitang blossoms. The wind picked up, scattering the pieces everywhere.

The white robes underneath flowed in the wind together with his ink black hair.

Blood on his shoulder.

Pieces of fabric in the wind.

The bloodstain where he had been injured protecting Mo Ran was all the more vivid and conspicuous on those white robes.

A long while passed before Chu Wanning sneered coldly, as if in ridicule. "Mo Weiyu, what is there between you and I to be misunderstood?"

He called Mo Ran Mo Weiyu whenever he was angry, cold and unfamiliar, a distant sort of polite address with not a hint of warmth.

Mo Ran choked, caught off guard, and had nothing to say.

Chu Wanning turned and walked away.

There was no one around at this hour, he walked ahead by himself as the earth and sky seemed to blur together.

His harsh and mocking expression fell apart as soon as he arrived at the inn room and closed the door.

Chu Wanning grit his teeth, a pained expression on his face as he lifted a hand to touch his shoulder.

The ghost mistress's claws were a kind of celestial body, no lesser than Tianwen; both were extremely powerful weapons. His entire shoulder was torn up, but there had been no time to take care of it during the demonic onslaught. By now, it had already gotten infected and was beginning to fester, the pain unbearable.

Standing in the room, Chu Wanning exhaled slowly and tried to take off the robes, but the fabric stuck to his skin where the blood had already dried, and the tug sent bolts of pain through his body.

Mo Ran's room was right next door. The inn was hardly soundproof, and he didn't want anyone to know, so he bit down on his lip and ripped the cloth off in one ruthless motion.

"Ngh.....!!"

Chu Wanning let out a stifled grunt, then slowly let go, blood on his teeth and lips where he had bitten too hard. He gasped for breath, face completely devoid of color, body covered in cold sweat.

He lowered his long lashes, trembling slightly as he looked down to take in the damage.

It wasn't too bad.

Still manageable...

Holding onto the table for support, he slowly lowered himself into the chair. Bit by bit, enduring the pain, he used the water and towel he had the inn's attendant bring to wipe the wound clean with his uninjured hand.

Then, using a sharp knife, cut out the dead flesh.

After that, apply the salve that Madam Wang made.

And finally, slowly, with difficulty, wrap the bandages around his shoulder by himself.

He wasn't used to showing weakness in front of others. He had gone through this kind of pain many times before, and every time he had gotten through it on his own.

An injured animal will find a place to hide and lick its wounds. Sometimes he felt like he was no different from those beasts, and that this solitary existence would probably continue into the future as well.

He knew he was unlikeable, so he didn't want to beg pitifully for anyone's help. He had his dignity.

But when he took off his robes, a brocade pouch fell to the floor.

The red satin was embroidered with silk tree flowers. His fingers shook from the pain as he slowly opened it. Inside were two locks of hair, corded together. His and Mo Ran's.

Chu Wanning's mind went blank for a moment. He wanted to hold the pouch to the candle flame and burn it together with its ridiculous contents. But he couldn't bear to do it in the end.

Cording hair to become husband and wife, conjugal love never to be doubted.

He could almost hear the golden boy and jade girl's quiet giggles.

He was aware of the throbbing deep in his own heart, and loathed himself all the more for it. He clenched the soft pouch tightly in his hand and slowly closed his eyes.

He couldn't accept these thoughts he held toward Mo Ran. He wished only that he could dig out his own heart and cut out the despicable thoughts inside, tear, rend, and throw them out.

Where was his decency, his propriety?

Was Mo Weiyu someone he ought to think about? What kind of a teacher was he? Truly worse than a beast!

Tap tap tap.

Knocks came from the door all of a sudden. Chu Wanning, in the middle of berating himself, startled, eyes opening wide as he hurriedly tucked the brocade pouch away in his sleeve. His face settled back into an ill-tempered expression.

“Who is it?”

“...Shizun, it’s me.” Mo Ran’s voice came from the outside, and Chu Wanning’s heartbeat sped up a little. “Can I come in?”

Ch.25 This Venerable One Really Can’t Stand Him!

Chu Wanning was silent for a long while, face full of doom and gloom, the words “get the hell out” stuck in his throat the whole time before they reluctantly came out as “get the hell in” in the end.

“Eh? Your door isn’t locked?” Mo Ran was trying to make up with him after an entire day of playing cold war, so he pushed the door open and walked in acting like nothing was wrong. Chu Wanning glanced at him without any expression from where he sat by the table.

Speaking from the heart, Mo Ran really was good-looking, brightening up the whole room with his presence alone. The youth’s firm skin almost seemed to glow, and the corners of his lips held a natural curve, such that he looked like he was smiling even with a neutral expression.

Chu Wanning kept his composure firmly under control as he moved his gaze away from Mo Ran and lowered his long lashes, raising a hand to extinguish the stick of incense on the table before asking impassively:

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to...check on your injury.” Mo Ran cleared his throat, then his gaze landed on Chu Wanning’s shoulder and he paused. “You’ve already taken care of it?”

Chu Wanning said mildly, “Mn.”

Mo Ran was speechless: “.....”

It was true that he held grudges against Chu Wanning, and that he was also mad at him for hurting Shi Mei. But once he’d calmed down, it wasn’t like Mo Ran didn’t have any conscience at all; hate was one thing, but he hadn’t forgotten how Chu Wanning’s shoulder had been injured.

Inside that stifling coffin, Chu Wanning had held him tightly in his arms, using his own body to block the ghost mistress’s claws, refusing to let go even as his whole body shook from the pain...

Mo Ran definitely loathed Chu Wanning.

But apart from the loathing, for some reason, there were always some other complicated feelings mixed in as well.

He was a crude person who had not received an education in his youth. Even though he studied and somewhat made up for it later on, he still had a hard time wrapping his head around many of the more delicate matters, especially those relating to emotions.

For example, when it came to Chu Wanning, Mo Ran had scratched his head and mulled it over for a long time, but he just could not figure out what this emotion was.

He only recognized simple emotions: like, dislike, hate, happy, unhappy.

But several emotions mixed together gave the brilliant and powerful Emperor Taxian-jun vertigo, made him see stars.

Don't get it, makes no sense, what is this, save me, ow my head.

So Mo Ran simply didn't bother to think about it any longer; he didn't care to waste that kind of energy on anyone besides Shi Mei.

Inwardly, he put the earlier incident on Chu Wanning's tab and secretly plotted to pay him back double, whenever he got the chance to settle the score. But at the same time, he also felt guilty. He'd warred with himself internally before finally knocking on Chu Wanning's door in the end.

He didn't want to owe him.

But Chu Wanning was even more headstrong than he had thought.

Mo Ran stared at the pile of blood stained bandages on the table, the crimson-colored water in the washing bowl, and the knife that had been casually tossed aside, bits of bloody flesh still clinging to its tip. He felt a headache coming on.

Just how had he managed to treat his own injury?

Had he really just cut unblinkingly into the dead flesh around his wound with his own hand, just like that? Mo Ran's scalp felt numb just thinking about it. Was this guy even human?

Shi Mei had whimpered softly from the pain with tears in his eyes when Mo Ran had cleaned his wound just now; regardless of how much he disliked Chu Wanning, he couldn't help mentally bowing to him——

Yuheng Elder was indeed boss as fuck, impressive, truly impressive.

Mo Ran stood there for a bit, then broke the silence first. He lightly coughed twice, toeing the floor, and mumbled awkwardly, "Earlier, at the Chen Manor... sorry, Shizun."

Chu Wanning said nothing.

Mo Ran stole a glance at him. "I shouldn't have yelled at you."

Chu Wanning continued to ignore him, a face of indifference as always. He'd never say it, but deep inside, he did feel wronged.

Mo Ran walked over. Only up close did he see that Chu Wanning had made a mess of the bandaging, the gauze wrapped around his shoulder like he was tying a crab.

"....."

Then again, what did he expect from someone who didn't even know how to do the laundry?

Sighing, Mo Ran said, "Shizun, don't be mad anymore."

"Which of your eyeballs saw me being mad?" Chu Wanning shot back angrily.

Mo Ran: "....."

A while passed.

"Shizun, that's not how you bandage..."

Another tart retort. "You think you know better than me?"

Mo Ran: "....."

He lifted his hand, wanting to redo the bandages for Chu Wanning, then looked at his expression and hesitated, gauging that the probability of getting slapped in the face for daring to touch him was quite high.

The hand lowered, then it raised. This repeated several times. Chu Wanning grew irritated and shot him a sideways glare. "What, you wanna hit me or something?"

"....." He did indeed want to hit him, but not right now.

Mo Ran grinned in exasperation and suddenly reached out to press his hand against Chu Wanning's shoulder, consequences be damned. Dimples appeared in his cheeks. "Shizun, here, I'll help you redo the bandages."

Chu Wanning originally wanted to refuse, but Mo Ran's warm fingers were already on him and his mouth was suddenly dry. His lips moved slightly but he said nothing in the end and just let Mo Ran do as he wanted.

The gauze unwrapped layer by layer, already soaked through with blood, until the five spine-chilling holes were revealed.

Just the sight of it made him shudder; the damage was much worse than the cut on Shi Mei's face.

Mo Ran stared for a bit, and then, for some reason even he himself did not understand, asked softly, "Does it hurt?"

Chu Wanning, long lashes downcast, only said mildly, "Not too much."

Mo Ran said, "I'll be gentle."

Chu Wanning didn't know what he was thinking of, but his earlobes turned a little red and he got mad at himself again, thinking he must be losing his mind to be having such absurd thoughts. So his expression grew even stiffer, mood even worse, and he muttered dryly, "Do as you will."

The candle flame crackled. By its dim yellow light, Mo Ran could see that the medicinal salve hadn't even been applied to some places. He was truly speechless; it must be by some kind of miracle that Chu Wanning had managed to live to this day.

"Shizun."

"Hm?"

"What happened at the Chen Manor today? Why did you beat them up?" He asked while applying the salve.

Chu Wanning was silent for a moment before answering, "I was angry, is all."

Mo Ran asked, "What made you so angry?"

Chu Wanning didn't feel like bothering with his junior right now, so he briefly told Mo Ran about Luo Xianxian. Mo Ran shook his head when the account was done. "That was silly of you. Something like this, no matter how mad it makes you, you still shouldn't have confronted them like that. If it was me, I'd just make some stuff up, fake the exorcism, then dust my hands and leave, let things run their course. You gotta adjust for the situation sometimes, you know. Look at you, made such a big mess over some worthless wretch, and even accidentally hit Shi Mei—"

Mo Ran caught himself halfway through the rant. He shut up and watched Chu Wanning.

He had been too focused on doing the bandages and had forgotten himself for a moment there, had unwittingly spoken to Chu Wanning in the impudent tone of his thirty two year old self.

Chu Wanning had clearly noticed it too. He was glaring coldly at Mo Ran from the corners of his eyes, the gaze alone conveying that familiar line—"I'm going to whip you to death".

"Erm..."

He was still scrambling to think of an excuse when Chu Wanning spoke first.

He said impassively, "Do you think I wanted to hit Shi Mingjing?"

As soon as Shi Mei was mentioned, reason left Mo Ran's brain and willfulness took over, and even his tone grew prickly. "Did you not hit him?"

Chu Wanning regretted the strike too, but his face was thin and he was mortified about it, so he scowled and said nothing.

Chu Wanning was headstrong, Mo Ran was lovestruck, and sparks flew where their glares collided in mid air. The atmosphere that had only just eased up a little bit once again became a hopeless impasse.

Mo Ran said, "It's not like Shi Mei did anything wrong. Shizun, can't you at least apologize for accidentally hurting him?"

Chu Wanning's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Are you interrogating me?"

"...No." Mo Ran paused. "I'm just upset that he was wrongfully injured, but didn't even get a 'sorry' from Shizun."

Under the candlelight, the handsome youth finished dressing Chu Wanning's wounds and carefully tied a knot. The scene still seemed somewhat tender as it had a moment ago, but both their moods were already vastly different. Especially for Chu Wanning, it was as if an entire jar of vinegar had toppled over inside his chest, the sour taste of jealousy swelling without stopping, getting under his skin.

Sorry?

How do you write sorry? Someone more apologetic please teach him.

Mo Ran continued, "It's gonna take at least half a year for that cut on his face to fade, but earlier when I was helping him apply medicine, he still said not to blame you. Shizun, it's true that he doesn't blame you, but even so, do you really think you're in the right?"

His words only added fuel to the fire.

Chu Wanning tried and failed to bear with it. He growled in a low voice, "Get the hell out."

Mo Ran: "....."

Chu Wanning snapped, "Out!"

Mo Ran got thrown out, the door slammed in his face and nearly on his fingers. Mo Ran's hackles rose too. Look at this, just look! What was his problem? It was just an apology! That face of his sure was precious, how hard was it to just say sorry? Even this venerable Emperor Taxian-jun knew to apologize, but the mere Beidou Immortal had to throw a hissy fit for no goddamn reason!

No wonder no one wanted him despite his handsome face!

A fucking waste, was what it was. He was gonna be single for life, and it served him right!

Since Chu Wanning had closed the door in his face and paid him no heed, the high and mighty Taxian-jun, Emperor of the human realm, obviously wouldn't just roll around outside the door like some shameless mutt. He was extremely persistent, clinging like sticky candy and impossible to peel off, but the one he clung to was Shi Mei, not Shizun.

He couldn't care less, and immediately left to go keep Shi Mei company.

"Back already?" Beauty Shi Mei^[13] was lying down resting when Mo Ran came in. He paused before sitting up, long black hair draping down his body. "How is Shizun?"

"He's just fine, and so is his temper."

Shi Mei: "....."

Mo Ran pulled up a chair and straddled it backwards, hands propped on its back, a lazy smile playing on his lips as he took in the sight of Shi Mei with his long, soft hair loose.

Shi Mei said, "Maybe I should go check on him after all..."

"Wah, don't do that to yourself." Mo Ran rolled his eyes. "He's throwing a fit right now."

"Did you make him mad again?"

"Does he even need someone to make him mad? He can even get mad at himself. The guy's probably made of wood, catches on fire at the slightest spark."

Shi Mei shook his head, caught between laughing and crying.

Mo Ran said, "Go back to rest, I'm gonna go downstairs and borrow the kitchen to cook something for you guys."

Shi Mei asked, "Going to so much trouble? You were up all night too, shouldn't you sleep?"

"Haha, I'm plenty awake." Mo Ran laughed. "But if you don't want me to leave yet, I can keep you company till you fall asleep?"

Shi Mei hurriedly waved a hand and said gently, "No need, I won't be able to sleep with you here watching. You should try to get some rest too, don't push yourself."

Mo Ran was a little dejected, and the smile on his lips went a little stiff.

Shi Mei was kind to him, yet always seemed to maintain a certain indiscernible distance. He was right in front of him, but he was also like the illusion of the moon in the mirror, the flower reflected in the water, in sight but unattainable.

"...Okay." He did his best to cheer up, forcing the smile back on his face. Mo Ran had a radiant smile, and he was silly to the point of being cute when he wasn't being mischievous. "Just call if you need anything, I'll be right next door, or else downstairs."

"Mn."

Mo Ran lifted a hand, wanting to pat Shi Mei's hair, but he managed to restrain himself and turned his hand back around to scratch his own head instead.

"I'm off then."

Once outside, Mo Ran couldn't resist a sneeze.
He sniffled.

Butterfly Town specialized in producing fragrances, and incense of all kinds were quite cheap, so the inn wasn't stingy about it. A long stick of specialty incense burned in every room, one to keep out evil spirits, another to remove moisture, and a third to make the rooms smell nice.

The smell of incense made Mo Ran uncomfortable, but Shi Mei liked it, so he endured it.

Downstairs, Mo Ran swaggered over to the innkeeper and slid a silver ingot over, eyes squinted in a smile. "Hey innkeep, do me a favor."

Seeing the silver ingot, the innkeeper's smile was even more courteous. "What does the good sir need?"

Mo Ran said, "I don't see many people here for breakfast anyway, can I trouble you to turn away the other guests and lend me the kitchen for the morning?"

How many coppers was breakfast worth? Even half a month's worth of breakfast wouldn't earn a single silver ingot. The innkeeper agreed eagerly, all smiles as he led Mo Weiyu, still swaggering, to the inn's kitchen.

"Is the sir going to cook himself? Why not have our chef do it, he's really good."

"No need." Mo Ran grinned. "Have you heard of the House of Drunken Jade^[14] in Xiangtan^[15]?"

"Ah...the famed entertainment house that burned down a little over a year ago?"

Mo Ran: "Mhm."

The innkeeper peeked outside to make sure his wife was busy with work and not listening in before giving a sneaky grin. "Who hasn't heard of that place? It was the most famous theater by the River Xiang, and even produced a star songstress, known far and wide. Too bad it's so far, or I'd go listen to her play too."

Mo Ran laughed, "Well, thanks for the compliment, on her behalf."

"On her behalf? On her behalf?" The innkeeper was puzzled. "You know her or something?"

Mo Ran replied, "More than just know her."

"Wow...wouldn't have known that just looking at you, eh? But can you cultivators even...uh..."

Mo Ran cut him off with a laugh. "Besides the star songstress, do you know anything else?"

"Um...I heard the food there was also unparalleled."

Mo Ran's lips curved into a cheery grin as he picked up the kitchen knife with an air of familiarity. "Before I was a cultivator, I worked as an assistant in the kitchens at the House of Drunken Jade for many years. Who do you think cooks better, your chef or me?"

The innkeeper was even more amazed, stumbling over his words. "The good sir is truly... truly..."

He kept mumbling "truly" but couldn't find the word.

Mo Ran glanced at him sidelong, with a smug smile on his face and an air of self-assured laziness. "Alright, out you go then, this venerable chef is gonna get to work."

The innkeeper had no idea he was currently speaking to the ex-lord of darkness, and shamelessly implored, "I've long heard about the delicacies at the House of Drunken Jade, perhaps when the good sir is done, might this lowly one ask to try some?"

He thought it was a small request, and that Mo Ran would definitely agree. Who knew that Mo Ran's eyes would squint in an impish smile. "You wanna try?"

"Yeah!"

"Keep dreaming!" Mo Ran hmpf'd with an air of arrogance, muttering, "Did you think this venerable one's gonna cook for just anyone? This is for Shi Mei, if not for him, this Venerable One wouldn't even step into the kitchen..."

He picked out a radish and started cutting it as he muttered to himself.

"....." Shot down, the innkeeper could only stand awkwardly to the side, rubbing his hands and simpering for a while before quietly slipping away.

He also muttered to himself on the inside.

What was all that with 'this Venerable One'? The boy was so young, he probably hadn't even formed a spiritual foundation yet. Listening to him rambling on it was shimei this shimei that, but there wasn't even a single girl in his group today.

The innkeeper rolled his eyes.

Must be crazy, and not just a little.

Mo Ran busied himself in the kitchen for four whole hours; it was nearly noon before he finished. He ran upstairs expectantly to wake Shi Mei up.

His footsteps slowed down as he passed Chu Wanning's room.

Should he call him to eat too...

Thinking of Chu Wanning's nasty temper, Mo Ran frowned in distaste. Nope, he only made a little bit anyway, none for him!

Ch.26 This Venerable One's First Meeting With Him

The sun climbed higher in the sky, and more and more people came by the inn to eat. Mo Ran found it noisy downstairs, so he had the attendant bring the dishes he'd made up to his room.

He did invite Chu Wanning in the end. Shizun was the highest ranked, after all; Mo Ran was no emperor of the human realm right now, so he had to play by the rules.

Three bowls of steamy noodle soup sat on the square beech table. He'd made the noodles himself, smooth and chewy, much better than what you could buy outside. Thick-cut slices of beef were piled on top, along with fried sausage, fresh and tender pea shoots, plump napa cabbage, and golden colored egg floss, the colorful ingredients artfully arranged.

But the most noteworthy thing was not the dewy greens, the generous cuts of meat, or even the abundance of ingredients, it was the broth that had been simmered on a low fire for four hours. The milky white broth had a layer of sesame chili oil on top; Mo Ran had ground the hot and numbing spices himself in a stone grinder and simmered it with the broth for a rich taste and tantalizing aroma.

He had used copious amounts of both chili oil and peppers, thinking about Shi Mei's love of spicy foods. Watching Shi Mei dig in with relish now, Mo Ran's grin stretched even wider. He stole a few glances and couldn't resist asking, "Is it good?"

Shi Mei said, "It's delicious."

Chu Wanning said nothing, still wearing a gloomy face like the heavens owed him a hundred mountains made of gold and silver.

Mo Ran was quite pleased with himself. "Then just let me know whenever you want to eat it again, I'll make it for you."

Shi Mei's eyes were watery from the spiciness when he looked up to smile at Mo Ran, expression gentle. Faced with such a beauty, if it weren't for Chu Wanning sitting on the side freezing half the room with his mere presence, it might have been difficult for Mo Ran to decide between eating the noodles in his bowl and eating Shi Mei.

Shi Mei didn't eat much of the pea shoots and sausage, but the beef and cabbage were quickly gone.

Mo Ran, who had been watching quietly from the side, reached out with his chopsticks and moved the pea shoots and sausage into his own bowl, then moved several pieces of beef from his bowl into Shi Mei's.

Sisheng Peak's disciples all ate at Mengpo Hall, often exchanging dishes with one another, so Shi Mei smiled and thought nothing of it. "A-Ran doesn't like beef?"

"Mhm, I like pea shoots."

Then he started chowing down. The tips of his ears were a little red.

Chu Wanning, expressionless, picked out the pea shoots in his bowl and tossed all of it into Mo Ran's bowl.

"I don't like pea shoots."

He also tossed all the beef in his bowl into Shi Mei's. "I also don't like beef."

Then he stared at the rest of the food in his bowl with furrowed brows, pressed his lips together and said nothing.

Shi Mei asked carefully, "Shizun... is it not to your taste?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

He didn't respond, only lowered his head and silently picked up a piece of cabbage, taking a small bite. His expression instantly grew worse and he put his chopsticks down with a 'pa'.

"Mo Weiyu, did you spill an entire jar of hot sauce into the soup?"

Mo Ran paused and looked up, a noodle still dangling from his mouth; he hadn't anticipated that the breakfast he had worked so hard on would receive such harsh criticism. He blinked at Chu Wanning, bewildered, unable to believe his own ears for a moment, before slurping down the noodle in his mouth.
"Wha?"

Chu Wanning was even less courteous this time. "Is this even food for people? Is it even edible?"

Mo Ran blinked several more times before it finally clicked that this prick Chu Wanning was roasting him. He shot back indignantly, "How is it not people food?"

The space between Chu Wanning's eyebrows twitched as he remarked, "It's truly unpalatable."

Mo Ran choked. No matter what, his skills had been sneakily learned from the best of the best at the House of Drunken Jade.

"Shizun aren't you...a little too picky."

Shi Mei also piped up, "Shizun, you haven't eaten for a whole day, even if you don't like it, still try to eat some."

Chu Wanning stood up and said coldly, "I don't eat spicy foods."

Then he turned and left.

The two left at the table fell into an awkward silence. Shi Mei was dumbfounded. "Shizun doesn't eat spicy foods? How come I didn't know that... A-Ran, you also didn't know?"

"I..."

Mo Ran stared blankly for a while at the noodles that Chu Wanning had left basically untouched, then nodded.

"Mn. I didn't know."

That was a lie. Mo Ran knew that Chu Wanning couldn't eat spicy food. It was just that he'd forgotten.

He had been tangled with this person for the greater part of his previous life, after all. He knew exactly what foods Chu Wanning liked and disliked.

But he didn't bother to keep it in mind, so he never remembered.

Chu Wanning returned to his room and lay down, still dressed. He faced the wall with his eyes wide open, unable to sleep.

He had lost a lot of blood and used too much spiritual energy. On top of that, he hadn't had a single bite to eat since yesterday, his stomach had long been empty and felt awful.

This person didn't know how to take care of himself at all. He was in a bad mood, so he simply didn't eat, as if he could fill his stomach with anger instead.

He didn't know what he was angry about. Or rather, he didn't want to know.

But in the silence, a face appeared before his unfocused eyes, lip corners curled softly into a brilliant smile, light flickering in a pair of clear black eyes, gentle with a hint of purple.

Warm and comfortable, and somewhat lazy.

Chu Wanning gripped the blanket, joints of his fingers pale from the force. He didn't want to sink into it, and closed his eyes in an attempt to escape that face and its careless laughter.

But the past surged forth even more with his eyes closed, and washed over him like a tide...

The first time he'd met Mo Ran had been in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower on Sisheng Peak.

The sun had been fierce that day, and all twenty elders were present, talking amongst themselves in low voices.

Yuheng Elder was an exception, naturally. He wasn't so foolish as to go stand over there with the rest of them to bake in the sun. Instead, he stood under a flowering tree by himself, preoccupied with examining the flexibility of the newly-made finger claw of a black metal gauntlet on his hand.

Of course he himself had no need for such things; he was forging these claws for the lower level disciples of Sisheng Peak.

The lower cultivation realm bordered the ghost realm, and so was often dangerous. It wasn't uncommon for the lower level disciples to get injured or even lose their lives. He never said anything about it, but Chu Wanning had been trying to work out a solution; he wanted to make a weapon that was light, nimble, and easy to learn.

The others stood to the side, chattering.

"Did you hear? That long-lost nephew of the Sect Leader was barely saved from a fire. No one else survived the place burning down. If the Sect Leader had been even a step slower, the nephew probably would've turned to ash too, it was truly a stroke of luck."

"Must've been his late father protecting him from the other side. It's heartbreaking that he became separated so young, and went through so many hardships, *sigh...*"

"The child is named Mo Ran? Fifteen years old, right? It's time for him to receive a courtesy name then, does he have one?"

"Xuanji Elder, the child grew up in a brothel, he's lucky to even have a name, much less a courtesy name."

"I heard the Sect Leader already thought of a couple, and is just choosing amongst them now. Wonder what he's going to pick in the end."

"The Sect Leader sure does value this nephew of his."

"You don't say? Not just the Sect Leader, either, even the Madam dotes on him endlessly. Heh, probably the only person in the entire Sisheng Peak to be displeased is our very own darling of the heavens——"

"Tanlang Elder! You mustn't speak with such indiscretion!"

"Haha, my bad, I slipped! But our darling of the heavens runs wild and pays little mind to propriety, disrespects elders, and lazes about idly all day with an air of born entitlement, he truly does lack some discipline."

"Tanlang Elder, how much have you had to drink today..." The person at his side gave him a meaningful look, gesturing with his chin toward Chu Wanning who was standing a distance away, his meaning obvious.

The darling of the heavens, Xue Meng, was Chu Wanning's disciple. To say that Xue Meng lacked discipline was just an indirect insult of Chu Wanning's teachings.

This Yuheng Elder was composed and refined in appearance, as if he was above the matters of the mortal realm, and surrounded by a lofty air. But everyone knew about his volatile temperament; if anyone rubbed him the wrong way, they might as well just wash their neck clean and wait for death by whipping.

Chu Wanning heard every word of their gossip.

But he paid them no mind. He had less interest in what others had to say about him than he did in the decorative patterns on the finger claw.

Speaking of which, the finger claw was pretty good, but not quite tough enough, and might not be able to rip through the thick hide of some demons in one strike. He would try adding some dragon bone powder when he got back, that should help.

The other elders saw that Chu Wanning didn't react, so they relaxed a little and went back to their chatter.

"The Sect Leader probably summoned all of us here today in order to pick a teacher for that Mo-gongzi, huh?"

"That's strange, why doesn't the Sect Leader teach him himself?"

"Supposedly, the little nephew's cultivation nature is incompatible with the Sect Leader's cultivation method," someone mumbled. "But even then, isn't it a bit much to gather all the elders for the young master to pick and choose from?"

Lucun Elder let out a soft sigh and brushed aside his smooth, graceful long hair, bemoaning, "My humble self feels like a cheap napa cabbage right now, laid out in the stall for little Mo-gongzi to pick."

Everyone: "....."

Could this fop please not blurt out the whole truth without a hint of finesse like this?

They waited for quite a while before the Sect Leader finally came. He walked up the thousand steps to arrive before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, a youth trailing behind him.

Chu Wanning only glanced over briefly, and didn't even bother to see clearly before looking away to continue examining his finger claw without a second glance.

Sisheng Peak's procedure for seeking apprenticeship under a teacher was well and truly unconventional. In every other sect, the teacher was high and mighty, and would rest his hand on some new disciple's head and utter, "Young man, your aptitude is satisfactory, henceforth you shall be my disciple."

The disciple wouldn't even get a chance to say "no".

Or else the teacher would wave his sleeve with a face of cold derision, and declare, "Young man, your forehead is too big, your eyes too dull, and the back of your skull protrudes too much, not the proper appearance for my sect. You and I are not fated to be, I will not accept you as my disciple."

The disciple wouldn't even get a chance to prove himself before the teacher would zoom away on his sword, hightailing it outta there faster than a dog.

Things were different here on Sisheng Peak: the teacher and disciple mutually chose one another.

What did that mean?

Sisheng Peak had twenty elders. When a new disciple entered the sect, they would first spend a period of time living alongside everyone and weighing their options before delivering a letter of intent to an elder, expressing their desire to seek apprenticeship.

If the elder accepted, then everything worked out perfectly.

If the elder declined, the disciple could continue badgering until either the elder gave in or the disciple gave up.

By all appearances, Chu Wanning was exceptionally skilled and handsome to boot, so one would expect his front yard to be filled to the brim at all hours of

the day with hopeful disciples relentlessly pursuing him as a teacher. But the reality was far different.

Chu Wanning's appearance was elegant, but his temper was so bad it made people's hair stand on end. Rumor had it that when he got angry, he could whip female disciples like one would male disciples, and sink his male disciples directly into the pond. Not many people were brave enough for this kind of shizun.

Thus, Yuheng Elder's residence was quiet and lonesome.

Other than the darling of the heavens Xue Meng, and Xue Meng's close friend Shi Mei, he had never accepted any other disciples.

Everyone would rather call him a respectful "Elder" than an intimate "Shizun".

Chu Wanning wore a lofty expression and insisted that he wasn't bothered by it at all. His head was lowered as he continued to tinker with the ice cold weapon in his hands, as if he couldn't care less. Everything he designed, from the sleeve-hidden weapons to the emergency whistles, were for others. The sooner he finished, the more people might avoid suffering.

So he didn't expect it at all when Mo Ran chose him without hesitation.

At the time, his brows were furrowed as he stroked the thorns on the finger claw, pondering on how to improve them and not even paying any attention to what the Sect Leader and everyone else was saying.

Without him noticing, everything had grown quiet.

Only after having thought of a method of improvement did Chu Wanning suddenly realize that the surroundings that had been buzzing with conversation a moment ago seemed a little too quiet.

So he finally moved his gaze away from the finger claw, and looked up with some impatience and incomprehension.

That was when he saw a face.

So brilliantly lit by the sun as to be nearly dazzling.

A handsome youth, head tilted back, was looking up at him. The corners of the youth's lips were curled into a faint, lazy smile, and a pair of dimples decorated his cheeks; a bit of a marketplace's smell of smoke and fire, and a bit of guileless innocence. A pair of purple-tinted black eyes stared unblinkingly at him, filled with fervor and curiosity both.

He was new and didn't know the rules, and stood so close that it was almost impudent.

Having someone appear so suddenly right in front of him, Chu Wanning was startled and reflexively stepped backwards as if burned. The back of his head met the trunk of the tree with a thump.

The youth's eyes widened slightly. "Ah..."

Chu Wanning: "....."

The youth: "....."

Chu Wanning said, "What are you doing?"

The youth grinned. "Xianjun xianjun^[16], I've been watching you for so long already, why won't you pay attention to me?"

Author's Notes:

Everyday I feel like Weiyu  is a dumb husky with a bizarre mind, while Shizun is like a pretentious and reserved on the outside but gentle on the inside

samoyed.

Ah, suddenly want to change the name to 《Dumb Husky and his Samoyed Shizun》

Ch.27 This Venerable One Will Make You a Bowl of Noodles

Chu Wanning's head reeled.

It was his own fault for being too preoccupied and not keeping his guard up while at Sisheng Peak, to the point that he didn't even notice that someone had gotten so close.

What was happening? Where'd the kid come from? Ah, wait was he that Mo something...Mo what again? Mo Shao? Mo Zhu? Mo...Yu?[\[17\]](#)

He arranged his expression into one of "Strangers Do Not Approach" with practiced ease, quickly sweeping the startle and fluster from his phoenix eyes to be replaced with his customary lofty standoffishness.

"You——"

He was just about to open his mouth and deliver a scolding out of habit when his hand was suddenly grabbed.

Chu Wanning was flabbergasted.

All his life, no one had ever dared to casually grab him by the wrist like this. He was frozen in place for a moment, face full of gloom, with no idea how to react.

Rip his hand out, followed by a backhand slap?

...All he needed to do was yell "Molester!" and he'd be the very image of an offended lady.

Then, rip his hand out, no slap?

...Wouldn't he seem a little too easygoing then?

Chu Wanning was still frozen with indecision when the youth grinned. "What's this on your hand? It's so pretty, do you teach how to make this stuff? Everyone else already introduced themselves, you're the only one who hasn't said anything yet, which elder are you? Ah, is your head okay? From the tree just now?"

Getting pummeled with so many questions in a row, if Chu Wanning's head hadn't been hurting before, it was now.

His head throbbed like it was about to split open...

In his agitation, a faint golden glow began to gather in his other hand, Tianwen just about to appear. The other elders were horror-struck——was Chu Wanning out of his mind? Did he dare to whip even Mo-gongzi?

But Mo Ran grabbed that hand too.

Now both of his hands were captured by the youth. Mo Ran had no idea just how much danger he was in as he stood before Chu Wanning, holding his hands and looking up with a smiling face. "I'm Mo Ran, I don't know anyone here, but based on face alone, I like you best. How about you be my teacher?"

No one had anticipated this turn of events, and everyone grew even more horrified; a few of the elders' faces already looked as if they had turned to stone and cracked in half.

Xuanji Elder: "Eh?"

Pojun Elder: "Wow!"

Qisha Elder: "Oh?"

Jielu Elder: "Uh..."

Tanlang Elder: "Hah, this is hilarious."

Lucun Elder, in his full foppish glory, twirled a strand of hair around a finger and batted his peach blossom eyes. "Aiya, the little gongzi sure is bold, truly young and courageous, to dare grope even Yuheng Elder's ass."

"...Could you *please* not say it so nauseatingly like that?" Qisha said with disdain.

Lucun gracefully rolled his eyes, humming. "Hm, I'll say it in a more refined manner then, truly young and courageous, to dare grope even Yuheng Elder's derrière."

Qisha: "....." Just kill him and be done with it.

Out of all the elders, the kind and gentle Xuanji Elder was the most popular. His cultivation method was easy to learn, and he was magnanimous and upstanding, so most of Sisheng Peak's disciples studied under him.

Chu Wanning thought that Mo Ran would be no exception. Even if he didn't choose Xuanji, he would definitely go for the forthright and spirited Pojun; in any case, whoever he chose, it surely wouldn't be himself.

But it was him that Mo Ran stood in front of, mere inches away, face full of intimacy and fondness, things that he was wholly unfamiliar with. He felt like he'd been designated the comic relief role out of the blue, and found himself suddenly flustered for no reason at all and at a complete loss for what to do.

Chu Wanning only knew how to deal with "respect", "fear", and "loathing". Something like "fondness" was far too difficult.

He rejected Mo Ran immediately and without thinking.

Mo Ran stood in place, stunned, the pair of eyes under those long eyelashes unexpectedly dejected yet unresigned. He thought about it for a long while with his head down, then mumbled stubbornly in a small voice, "Well it's gonna be you anyway."

Chu Wanning: "....."

The Sect Leader watched from the side with amusement, and couldn't resist asking with a laugh, "A-Ran, do you even know who he is?"

"How would I know, he hasn't told me."

"Haha, if you don't even know who he is, then why are you so set on him?"

Mo Ran, still holding onto Chu Wanning's hands, turned and answered with a smile, "'Cause he looks the gentlest and the most easygoing, of course!"

In the darkness, Chu Wanning's eyes flew open abruptly, vision swimming. ...What the *actual* hell.

He wondered what exactly had been wrong with Mo Ran's eyes back then, to find him gentle. He wasn't alone in that, either; the entire Sisheng Peak heard about the incident, and everyone had looked at Mo Ran-gongzi with concerned expressions of "what a foolish child".

Chu Wanning lifted a hand to press against his throbbing temple.

His shoulder hurt, his thoughts were a mess, his stomach was empty, his head was dizzy.

This nap wasn't happening.

He starfished in a daze in bed for a while before sitting up. He was just about to light a stick of incense to help calm himself down when knocks came from the door again.

It was Mo Ran again.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

He ignored it, didn't say get the hell in or get the hell out.

But this time, the door opened by itself.

Chu Wanning lifted his head gloomily, but the already-lit match between his fingers paused in mid-air without touching the incense, and after a while, went out by itself.

Chu Wanning spoke, “Get the hell out.”

Mo Ran got the hell in.

He had a bowl of steamy noodles in his hands, freshly made.

It was simpler this time, plain noodles in pure white broth, sprinkled with chopped onions and white sesame seeds, some pork spare ribs on top, napa cabbage, and a poached egg lightly crisped around the edges.

Chu Wanning was starving, but his face remained impassive. He looked at the noodles, looked at Mo Ran, then turned his face away without saying a word.

Mo Ran set the bowl down on the table and said softly, “I had the inn's cook make these noodles.”

Chu Wanning lowered his eyelashes.

Of course Mo Ran hadn't made it himself.

“Try to eat some,” Mo Ran said. “This bowl isn't spicy, and there's no beef or pea shoots.”

Then he left, closing the door on his way out.

He felt bad about Chu Wanning's injury.

But this was about all he could do.

Inside the room, Chu Wanning sat by the window, lost in thought, his arms crossed as he stared at that bowl of spare rib noodles from far away, until the steam disappeared, until the noodles grew cold, with not a hint of warmth left.

Only then did he finally walk over and sit down, picking up the cold, already congealed noodles with chopsticks and slowly beginning to eat.

The case of the haunting of the Chen Manor was concluded.

The next day, they picked up their black horses from the boarding stables and headed back to the sect along the same road they'd taken coming here.

All over town, from the tea stands to the food stalls, everyone in Butterfly Town was talking about what had happened with the Chen family.

In such a middling town, a scandal like this was enough to be the talk of the town for at least a year.

“Who would've thought that Chen-gongzi had already married Miss Luo behind closed doors, *sigh*, poor Miss Luo.”

“If you ask me, this wouldn't have happened if the Chens didn't strike it rich. You really can't let men get rich, or all the bad waters^[18] in their bellies will flood out and drown the whole city.”

A man was dissatisfied hearing that. “Chen-gongzi did nothing wrong, it was all on his dad and mom. I hope that bastard Landlord Chen's future kids and grandkids get born without assholes.”

Someone else said, “The dead are pitiful for sure, but what about the living? Look at Chen-Yao, treasured daughter of the Yao family, she got the shortest end of the stick no matter how you look at it. That old, black-hearted Chen bitch swindled the poor girl, what should she even do now?”

"Remarry of course."

The person rolled his eyes, scoffing. "Remarry? Would you take her?"

The peasant that got scoffed at grinned toothily, picking at the gap between his teeth while saying, "If my woman's fine with it, then sure, why not. Miss Yao's real pretty, I ain't gonna mind the widow thing."

"Puh, keep dreaming, even as second-hand goods she's way out of your league."

Mo Ran's ears were perked up where he sat on his horse, energetically listening over here and peering over there. If not for Chu Wanning with his eyes closed and brows furrowed, "too damn noisy" all but written on his face, Mo Ran might have even scooted over to join in on the gossip.

Riding side by side, they finally made it out of the town proper and arrived at the outskirts.

Shi Mei suddenly let out a surprised noise and pointed to the distance. "Shizun, look over there."

A large group of farmers in coarse clothes were gathered in front of the destroyed temple, busily ferrying bricks around. They seemed intent on rebuilding the temple and reconstructing the statue of the ghost mistress of ceremonies.

Shi Mei said, worried, "Shizun, the previous ghost mistress is gone, but they're making another. Will this one cultivate into a deity and cause trouble too?"

Chu Wanning said, "I don't know."

"Should we go and try to talk them out of it?"

Chu Wanning answered, "Butterfly Town's ghost marriage tradition has been around for generations already, it's not something that can be changed by anything we say. Let's leave."

Then he galloped off, clouds of dust trailing behind.

It was already evening by the time they got back to Sisheng Peak.

At the main gate, Chu Wanning instructed his disciples, "The two of you go report in at Loyalty Hall. I will go to the Discipline Court."

Mo Ran didn't understand. "What are you going there for?"

But worry was written plainly on Shi Mei's face: "....."

Chu Wanning's expression was impassive. "To receive punishment."

The saying went that a crime was a crime, whether committed by a peasant or the emperor, but which emperor had ever actually been thrown in jail to await beheading for killing a man? It was no different here in the cultivation realm.

A transgression was a transgression whether committed by a disciple or an elder—these were just empty words in the vast majority of the sects.

In reality, an elder that committed a transgression might at most write an apology letter. Which idiot would actually go and obediently receive their round of whipping or some dozen strikes?

That was why Jielu Elder's face was green by the time he finished listening to Chu Wanning's confession.

"No it's just that, Yuheng Elder, you really...you really hit the client?"

Chu Wanning replied mildly, "Mn."

"You're really too..."

Chu Wanning looked up to shoot him a glare. Jielu Elder shut up.

"In accordance with the rules, the punishment for this transgression is two hundred strikes, three days of protracted kneeling in YanLuo Hall, and three months of confinement," Chu Wanning stated. "I have no disputes, and I am prepared to receive the punishment."

Jielu Elder: "....."

He glanced left and right, then hooked his finger. The doors to the Discipline Court closed with a thud, leaving only the two of them standing face to face in the silence.

Chu Wanning said, "What is the meaning of this?"

"How to say... Yuheng Elder, it's not like you don't know, the rules may be rules, but they don't *really* apply to you. The doors are closed, this stays between you and I, what say you we just let it slide? If I actually strike you, and the Sect Leader finds out, he'll have my old hide."

Chu Wanning didn't feel like wasting his breath on him, so he simply said, "I hold others to the rules, and I will hold myself equally to the same."

Then he knelt down right there in front of the hall, facing the plaque above the door that read "Discipline".

"Carry out the punishment."

Author's Notes:

About the creation of the new book title.

Me: I want to change the title to 《Dumb Husky and His Samoyed Shizun》 .

Friend: ...Samoyed? Aren't samoyeds smiling angels? Is Shizun a smiling angel? Can he smile?

Me: ...Guess that makes a lot of sense.

Friend: Make it cat.

Then it was changed to 《Dumb Husky and his White Cat Shizun》 , after typing these words, my mind kept playing, Oh Oh Oh, Black Cat Detective, Oh Oh Oh, Black Cat Detective~[\[19\]](#)

In the future we can make animal personification mini theatres~

Big white cat Shizun, japanese spitz Shi Mei, husky Mo Ran, little peacock Xue Meng.

Ch.28 This Venerable One's Mind Is in a Bit of a Mess

The news that Yuheng Elder was being punished for breaking the rules spread as if it had sprouted a pair of wings; it didn't even take until the next morning, practically everyone in the sect found out that very night.

Two hundred strikes would probably beat an ordinary person to death. Even for a cultivator, it would still be quite unbearable.

Xue Meng jumped to his feet when he heard. "What?! Shizun went to the Discipline Court?"

"Young master, please hurry and talk to the Sect Leader, Shizun is already injured, how could he possibly endure two hundred strikes?"

Xue Meng was so anxious he was just about to lose it. "My dad? That won't do, he's still not back from Taxue Palace yet; a message by bird won't arrive until

tomorrow at the earliest. Why didn't you guys stop Shizun?"

Mo Ran and Shi Mei exchanged a glance.
Stop Chu Wanning?
Who in this entire world was capable of that?

"Damn it, I'm gonna go after him right now." Xue Meng dashed off toward the Discipline Court in a hurry. He hadn't even entered the courtyard yet when he spotted a group of Jielu Elder's disciples crowded around the doors to the main hall, whispering amongst themselves.

"What're you all doing standing there? Get out of my way! Move!"

"Young master!"

"Ah, the young master is here."

"Make way for the young master."

The disciples quickly parted to the sides to let Xue Meng through. The doors of Clearsky Hall stood open. Chu Wanning knelt inside with his back straight and eyes closed, not speaking a word. Jielu Elder, holding a metal rod, was reading the rules of Sisheng Peak aloud, each rule accompanied by one brutal strike of the metal rod to Chu Wanning's back.

"The ninety first rule of this sect: do not injure the innocent, do not use cultivator techniques against the common people. Under the rod, do you have any complaints?"

"No complaints."

"The ninety second rule of this sect: do not act rashly of one's own accord, do not indulge in self-gratification. Under the rod, do you have any complaints?"

"No complaints."

Jielu Elder did not dare to go easy in the punishment. Ninety or so strikes and Chu Wanning's white robes were already soaked through with blood.

Xue Meng held Chu Wanning in the highest esteem. His eyes became instantly bloodshot at the sight, and he called out at the top of his lungs, "Shizun!"

Chu Wanning pretended not to hear; his eyes remained closed, a slight furrow between his brows.

Jielu Elder glanced over to the door and said quietly, "Yuheng Elder, the young master is here."

"I'm not deaf, I heard." Blood trickled out from the corner of his lips, but he still did not look up. "He's just being a noisy child, pay him no mind."

Jielu Elder sighed. "...Yuheng, is this truly necessary?"

"It can't be helped that my disciples are always being disobedient." Chu Wanning spoke mildly. "If I do not receive my due punishment today, how will I have the face to discipline anyone else in the future?"

"....."

"Please continue."

"*Sigh...*" Jielu Elder looked at Chu Wanning's pale, delicate neck, exposed above the open collars, drooping gently down like thin mist, and couldn't help but suggest, "Then at least go easier?"

"...That would be no different from deception," Chu Wanning said. "Don't worry, it's just two hundred strikes, I can handle it."

"Yuheng Elder..."

"Jielu, there is no need to say any more, continue."

The metal rod fell once again.

Even Xue Meng's voice became distorted. "Jielu Elder! Are you still not fucking stopping? Have you no regard for your young master? That's my Shizun you're hitting!! My Shizun!!!"

Jielu Elder could only force himself to pretend not to hear.

Xue Meng's lungs were about to explode from anger. "Have you gone deaf, you shitty old man? Your young master is ordering you to stop! If, if you dare to hit him again, I, I, I—"

He got stuck on "I" and couldn't think of what to say. He was only a fifteen year old youth after all, "darling of the heavens" or not, his strength and status were still far below the elders. In the end, red faced, he could only choke out an obstinate——

"I'll tell my dad!!!"

Jielu Elder: "....."

Chu Wanning let out a nearly imperceptible sigh.

Ninety seven strikes. Ninety eight strikes. Ninety nine strikes. One hundred strikes...

Even the fabric became ripped from the strikes. The blood was appallingly red.

Xue Meng couldn't handle any more. Eyes red with panic, he made to recklessly charge into the hall, but Chu Wanning suddenly opened his eyes and brandished a hand, and a barrier immediately split the space in two, blocking off the door and forcing Xue Meng back away several steps, falling to the ground.

Chu Wanning coughed blood, a pair of narrowed phoenix eyes harsh as lightning.

"Disgraceful. Go back where you came from!"

"Shizun!"

Chu Wanning said harshly, "Since when could Sisheng Peak's young master order Jielu Elder to bend the rules? Hurry and get lost!"

Xue Meng stared wide-eyed at him, a shimmer of wetness in his eyes.

Mo Ran stood to the side stroking his chin, the corners of his lips still curled. "Aiya, oh no, the little phoenix is gonna cry."

At these words, Xue Meng whipped his head around and glared at Mo Ran. His eyes were rimmed in red, but he stubbornly refused to let the tears fall.

He didn't complain, and didn't talk back.

Only crawled up from the ground and dusted himself off with head lowered and teeth gritted, then knelt facing Clearsky Hall. "Shizun, this disciple was wrong."

Chu Wanning was still enduring the strikes, back held ramrod straight and never once bending, but his face was pale and there was a sheen of cold sweat on his forehead.

Xue Meng continued stubbornly, "But I'm not leaving. I'm going to keep Shizun company."

Saying so, he knelt and refused to get up.

Mo Ran's eyes were about to roll out of their sockets. Xue Meng, Xue Ziming, darling of the heavens, would only lower himself to this extent in front of Chu Wanning. He was a phoenix to everyone else, but a quail to Shizun. If Mo Ran wasn't so certain that Xue Meng had no interest in men, he'd probably wonder if he had a crush on Chu Wanning, to be so hell-bent and without regret. If Shizun were to slap him, the little quail would humbly turn the other cheek.

Alright, alright.
Brown-noser extraordinaire.

His heart felt contempt, but his mouth tasted sour^[20] for some reason. Mo Ran glared at Xue Meng for a while, growing more agitated the longer he looked, thinking that he couldn't let him be the only one to show devotion.

Chu Wanning already didn't like him, with this trick that Xue Meng was pulling, wouldn't he be even more biased in the future?

So he knelt as well, next to Xue Meng.

"I'll keep Shizun company too."

Naturally, Shi Mei followed suit as well, and all three disciples knelt outside, waiting. The other elders' disciples, hearing the news, all found some excuse or another to come to the Discipline Court and watch the show.

"Heavens, how could it be Yuheng Elder..."

"I heard he beat up a common person in a fit of rage."

"Ah! So scary?"

"Shh, quiet, if Yuheng Elder hears you'll be next on the whipping block!"

Someone else: "But why is the young master kneeling?"

"Mo-gongzi too..."

Mo Ran was handsome and charming, and had earned the favor of countless female disciples in his daily life. Quite a few of the onlookers felt sorry for him, whispering, "Poor Mo-gongzi... what to do, should we go make a plea on his behalf?"

"We probably shouldn't meddle in their master-disciple affairs. You can go if you have the guts, but I don't wanna die yet. Did you already forget that one shijie who got whipped some hundred times by Yuheng Elder..."

"....."

The two hundred strikes finished.
The barrier was finally withdrawn.

Xue Meng scurried up from the ground and stumbled frantically into Clearsky Hall. When he got close and saw Chu Wanning's condition, he let out a furious "AH" and turned to grab Jielu Elder by the collars, screaming, "You shitty old man! Don't you fucking know to at least hold back!!!"

"Xue Ziming." Chu Wanning's eyes were closed, blood-stained lips opening and closing, his voice hoarse but commanding.

"....."

Xue Meng's joints cracked audibly as he let Jielu Elder go and shoved him aside. Mo Ran arrived too at this moment, still smiling, thinking that Jielu Elder would have definitely held back on his strikes in consideration of Chu Wanning's status. But that smile froze abruptly on his face when he looked down at Chu Wanning's condition.

Had he seriously not told Jielu Elder about the injury on his shoulder?!
The majority of those two hundred strikes had landed unsparingly on that shoulder.

New wounds on top of the old.
Chu Wanning, you...
Have you lost your mind?!

Mo Ran's pupils contracted, a tidal wave of intense detestation washing over him.

He didn't know what exactly it was that he detested, or just what he was so angry about, only that a raging inferno was soaring through his stomach and burning through all of his organs. He was used to Chu Wanning being tormented to the breaking point at his own hands as he crushed his dignity and defiled his purity. But Mo Ran couldn't stand Chu Wanning being bruised and scarred at the hands of another!

Maybe it was because he couldn't forget what happened in the previous lifetime, but Mo Ran subconsciously felt like this person belonged to him, for him to let live or let die, to be loathed or to be hated, all of that belonged to him.

He originally didn't mind Chu Wanning being punished, thinking that he was an elder so the two hundred strikes definitely wouldn't be with any real force.

Or at the very least, that the strikes would avoid the yet-unhealed wounds on his shoulder.

But Chu Wanning actually hadn't spoken up about it! He hadn't spoken up about it! What was this crazy person being so stubborn about? What was he forcing himself through all this for? What the fuck was this stupid idiot trying to prove?!?

Head a complete mess, Mo Ran lifted a hand to go support Chu Wanning, but Xue Meng had beat him to it and was already helping him up.

"....." Mo Ran's hand paused in mid air, then lowered back down after a while.

He watched them walking away, Xue Meng supporting Chu Wanning, an unknown feeling in his chest.

He wanted to follow, but couldn't move his feet.

Everything that had happened in the previous lifetime was in the past.
Now, Chu Wanning was only his Shizun.

None of the muddled, hateful, gentle entanglements between them had happened.

He shouldn't be having these thoughts. It didn't matter to him who Chu Wanning got hit by, who he was supported by, who he spent time with, or even if he got killed by someone. None of it had anything to do with him.

Shi Mei walked up beside him. "Come on, let's go with them and take a look."

"I'll pass, Xue Meng has it covered. I can't help anyway, and too many people will just add to the mess." Mo Ran's expression didn't change, but his mind was in a bit of a mess.

He really, truly could not understand what it was that he felt right now.

Was it hate?

Author's Notes:

Bonus character card, #2

Xue Meng

Courtesy name: Ziming

Nickname: This person hasn't died yet.

Occupation: His father is the king of the mountain, he is the young master of the mountain king.

To put it simply: Child of an entrepreneur.

Social Appearance: A cultivation talent that has yet to finish his apprenticeship.

To put it simply: Unemployed young adult.

Current favorite: Someone to boast about him, praise him, boast about him to death.

Favorite food: Hotpot, the abnormally spicy kind.

Dislike: No one to boast about him.

Height: At the moment 169, after he's fully grown 178

Ch.29 This Venerable One Doesn't Want You to Die

That night, Mo Ran lay in his bed on Sisheng Peak with his hands behind his head, staring at the roof beams above, completely unable to sleep.

The events of the past played out in his mind, one by one, until finally, in the end, every bit, each fragment was Chu Wanning's face, elegant to the point of being cold.

If truth be told, Mo Ran never understood just how he felt about this person.

The first time he'd seen him had been under the flowering tree in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower. He had been wearing a loose robe with wide sleeves, the only one out of the twenty elders who was not dressed in the fetching silver-blue armor of Sisheng Peak.

That day, fiddling absentmindedly with the armored claw on his hand with his head lowered, his profile had looked focused yet gentle, like a white cat bathed in warm, golden sunlight.

Mo Ran had stared from afar, and hadn't been able to look away.

His first impression of Chu Wanning had been positively glowing.

But it had not held up against the negligence, the punishments, and the cold harshness that had followed, one after the other. That white cat's sharp teeth and claws had left him covered in wounds.

He'd been barely hanging onto life by a thread when Uncle had saved him from the sea of fire. He'd thought that, once at Sisheng Peak, he would have a shizun to treat him with compassion, to care for him with sincerity.

But however hard he tried to please, however much work he put in, it was as if Chu Wanning saw none of it. Conversely, the smallest mistakes earned him a round of ruthless lashings, and he came out raw and bleeding every time.

Later, he learned that Chu Wanning looked down on him from the bottom of his heart—

"Deficient by nature, beyond remedy."

Was this what that person standing under the flowering tree, robes white as snow, thought of him?

He'd once regarded Chu Wanning as the cold moon in the ninth heaven, had wholeheartedly revered him, adored him. But what was he to that cold moon, really?

A disciple he had no choice but to accept.

A lowlife who was lowly to the bone.

A no-good child raised in a brothel, a filthy reprobate.

Mo Ran always laughed it off like he didn't care, but he'd slowly begun to hate Chu Wanning, a kind of hatred mixed with an aggressive unwillingness to yield.

He refused to accept it.

Ever since, holding onto the resentment he felt that grew by the day, he'd kept provoking Chu Wanning in attempts to get his attention, his praise, his astonishment.

During that time, if Shi Mei had praised him with "well done", he would've flown into the sky with happiness.

But if Chu Wanning had been willing to give him a "not bad", he would've gladly given his life.

But Chu Wanning never praised him.

No matter how hard he tried, how diligent he was, how well he did, that aloof person never gave more than a slight nod before turning his face away.

Mo Ran was about to lose it.

Heaven knew how much he wanted to grab Chu Wanning by the face back then and make him turn around, force him to look at himself, to see himself, to take that "deficient by nature, beyond remedy" back!

But he could only kneel before Chu Wanning like a docile stray dog, lowering his head and saying with the utmost respect, "This disciple will keep Shizun's teachings in mind."

In front of Chu Wanning, Mo Weiyu was lowly to the bone.

Even if he was a "young master", he was still worthless.

He finally understood that someone like Chu Wanning would never look at him with anything but contempt.

Even later, after many things had happened.

Mo Ran took over Sisheng Peak, then took aim at the top and became the first ever emperor of the cultivation world. Underneath his dark banner, everyone trembled with fear and dared not even speak his name in more than the quietest of whispers. No one remembered his stain, his unmentionable origins——

Henceforth, there was no more Mo Weiyu, only Taxian-jun^[21].
Taxian-jun.

Everyone hated him, hated him to the extreme. Monstrous Mo Weiyu, may he be damned to eternity without rebirth or redemption!^[22]

TaxianjunMoWeiyuTaxianjunMoWeiyuTaxianjun——

...Ta. Xian. Jun.

But so what if they were scared? Sisheng Peak still reverberated with the rumble of voices shouting in unison as thousands prostrated before him in front of Wushan Palace, all those heads bowing to him in veneration^[23].

"Long Live Emperor Taxian-jun."

He'd felt fantastic.
Until he'd seen Chu Wanning's face in the crowd.

Chu Wanning's cultivation had already been abolished by then. He was tied up below the hall, reduced to a mere prisoner beneath the steps.

Mo Ran had already decided to execute him. But he didn't want Chu Wanning to have a quick and easy death, so he'd shackled his limbs, cut a small gash in the artery of his neck, and enchanted the wound to not congeal. Blood trickled out drop by drop, life drained away bit by bit.

The sun blazed overhead. The coronation ceremony had been underway for a while, and Chu Wanning's blood should have been nearly drained.

With this person's death, Mo Ran would finally be freed from his past; thus, he purposefully arranged to have him bled out at his coronation.

This way, when he became the master of the cultivation world, Chu Wanning would be a lifeless corpse.

And everything that happened in the past would be wiped clean.
Perfect.

But why, even at the gates of death, was this person still so indifferent? Still so elegant as to be cold...his face was entirely without color, but his expression still impassive. When he looked at Taxian-jun, there was neither praise nor fear.

Only revulsion, disdain, and—

Mo Ran thought he must have gone mad. Or else Chu Wanning must have gone mad.

And a hint of pity.

Chu Wanning, who was on the verge of death, who had been defeated by him, pitied him! He actually pitied him, he who stood at the apex above all else, who held boundless power. He, he actually—he actually dared!!!

The rage that had piled up over more than ten years finally drove Mo Ran mad. Right there at Loyalty Hall—already renamed Wushan Palace by then—in front of the thousands of people gathered there, surrounded by the thundering of their acclamation and flattery, he abruptly stood up, black robes billowing, and walked down the steps.

In front of all those people, he grabbed Chu Wanning by the jaw, a sweet yet menacing smile on his twisted face.

"Shizun, today is a happy occasion for this disciple, why aren't you celebrating?"

The thousands of people fell instantly into a deathly silence.

Chu Wanning was neither deferential nor domineering, his expression cold as ice as he said, "I have no disciple like you."

Mo Ran burst out laughing, the sound of his unrestrained laughter circling the stoa of the golden hall like so many vultures.

"Shizun is so heartless, this Venerable One is disappointed." He laughed as he spoke, voice resounding. "You have no disciple like me? Who taught me my cultivation then? Who taught me my martial skills? And my cold-blooded ruthlessness—who taught me that?! And the whip scars all over my body that still will not fade—let me ask you, who gave me those!"

He stopped smiling, voice suddenly vicious, a cold light in his eyes.

"Chu Wanning! Are you that ashamed of having a disciple like me? Are my bones too lowly or is it my blood that's too filthy? Let me ask you, Chu Wanning, let me ask you—what does 'deficient by nature, beyond remedy' mean?"

He was going out of his mind, voice twisting as he bellowed.

"You've never seen me as your disciple, never thought anything of me! But I ——but I once——really did see you as my teacher, really did respect you, adored you! Why did you treat me like this? Why did you never spare me so much as a single word of praise, why is it that no matter what I did, I could never get even the slightest bit of approval from you?!"

Chu Wanning's entire body shuddered, face growing even paler.

Those phoenix eyes widened slightly as he stared at Mo Ran. His lips moved, as if wanting to say something, but nothing came out in the end.

Everyone who used to be at Sisheng Peak was gone by now; the last two left from those bygone days stared at one another just like this.

Mo Ran seemed to finally calm down in the uncomfortable silence that followed. He closed his eyes, and when they opened again, he once again wore that detestable smile that made people shiver.

He said gently and cordially, "Shizun, haven't you always looked down on me, always thought I was lowly?"

He paused, gaze sweeping across the thousands kneeling before his palace like so many crouching dogs, all in acknowledgement of him as the overlord of the cultivation world, above mortal affairs.

Mo Ran smiled. "How about now? Before you die, let me ask you again. In this world, just who is the lowly one, and who is the respectable one? Who's the one stepping on whom? Who won in the end? Who lost?"

Chu Wanning's eyelashes were lowered, as if still lost in Mo Ran's confession from a moment ago. Finally, Mo Ran gripped his jaw and forcefully tilted his face up.

But in that instant, Mo Ran suddenly froze.

It was the first time he'd ever seen regret on Chu Wanning's face.

That expression was far too unfamiliar; Mo Ran abruptly pulled back his hand, as if burned.

"You..."

Chu Wanning's expression was pained, as if silently enduring some kind of agony that dug into the bones, some sort of anguish that tore apart the organs.

His voice was quiet.

It floated in the wind, heard by Mo Ran alone.

He said, "I'm sorry, Mo Ran. It was this master's fault..."

Suddenly the world fell silent. The sound of the wind, the rustling of the leaves, the billowing of robes, all of it faded away.

There was only Chu Wanning's face looking up at him. It was the only thing in the entire world that was clear, all that he could see.

Much should have passed through his mind at the time. Glee, smugness, ecstasy.

But none of it did.

There was but one strange thought in his mind then, and only one——

When had he gotten...so much taller than Chu Wanning?

A lot of time really had passed.
And many things had changed.

Mo Ran's lips moved haltingly in a whisper. "What...did you just say?"

But Chu Wanning only smiled, a smile that Mo Ran knew yet also did not, and in that pair of phoenix eyes he saw the reflection of his own twisted expression.

Then those eyes slowly closed, and Chu Wanning fell backwards—Mo Ran gripped his shoulders in that same instant, his crazed, angry bellow like that of a beast falling to pieces.

“Chu Wanning! Chu Wanning what did you say? Say it again!!”

The person in his arms did not reply, lips pale as pear blossoms. That handsome face had always looked so aloof, but now, moments before death, it was frozen into a sad smile, a slight curve at the corners of the lips, just like the face in Mo Ran’s memories of when he’d first seen him in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

A small, gentle smile.

“Chu Wanning!!”

That gentleness shattered, haitang flowers withered and scattered all over the ground.

He’d finally got what he wanted, treading Shizun’s life underfoot as he climbed to the top of the world.

But what was this? What was this!!

The anguish and hatred in his chest only grew worse, *what the fuck was this?*

A faint black fog gathered in Mo Ran’s hand as he quickly tapped Chu Wanning’s meridians, sealing the last remains of his life.

“Were you hoping to die just like this?” Mo Ran’s eyes bulged, his expression vicious, “I’m not done with you, Chu Wanning, I still have a score to settle with you, I’m not done! I’m not fucking done yet! If you don’t say it to me clearly—I’ll crush Xue Meng, Kunlun Taxue Palace, and all the people left that you wanted to protect!! I’ll rip them all to shreds!! You better think again!!”

Forget about the ceremony, screw the thousands of people still kneeling there.

He changed his mind. He didn’t want Chu Wanning to die anymore.

He hated him, he wanted Chu Wanning to live—live...

He picked up that person who had lost too much blood in one sweeping motion and, evoking his qinggong [24], jumped onto the tall overhanging eaves in one leap, robes fluttering like a lone eagle unfurling its wings. He flew rapidly across one roof after another, headed straight for the southern peak—straight for the Red Lotus Pavilion, where Chu Wanning had once lived.

That place had an abundance of spiritual energy and numerous medicinal herbs. He was going to bring Chu Wanning back.

A person must be alive to be hated; if that person died, there would no longer be a reason to hate them. Had he been out of his mind earlier, wanting to kill Chu Wanning with his own hands?

If Chu Wanning died, then what did he even have left in this world...

Lying in bed, the taste of past memories on his tongue.

It was already late at night, but he couldn’t sleep at all.

Mo Ran got up, washed his face, got dressed, and with a lantern in hand, headed toward Yanluo Hall.

Chu Wanning had definitely just carelessly bandaged his wounds before going there for his punishment by kneeling. Mo Ran knew how he was, stubborn

to a fault and unyielding to boot, never giving even an iota of consideration to whether his own body could take it, and Xue Meng couldn't stop him even if he tried.

Sure enough, a small lamp could be seen from outside Yanluo Hall, burning by itself, candle wax dripping slowly.

Chu Wanning knelt with his back facing the door, figure straight and upright like a pine.

Mo Ran regretted it a little when he saw this figure. It was the middle of the night, what was he doing? Coming here to see Chu Wanning? Had he gone mad?

But he was already here, and it would feel silly to just turn around and leave again.

He thought for a moment, and settled on a compromise. Lightly, he set the lantern down by his feet. He wouldn't leave, but he wouldn't go in either. Standing outside the window, he propped his elbows up on the frame, rested his cheeks in his hands, and stared at Chu Wanning from far away.

The copper bells hanging from the corners of the roof swayed gently, and the sweet fragrance of the flowers and plants filled the night air.

The two of them—one standing, one kneeling—separated by a red lattice window, separated by the empty silence of the hall.

If this had been before the rebirth, Mo Ran would have had the authority to stride into the hall and order Chu Wanning to stop reflecting and go back to rest.

If Chu Wanning refused, he would have had the capacity to seal the movement of his limbs and forcefully carry him off.

But right now, he had neither the authority nor the capacity.

He wasn't even as tall as Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran's head was all messed up. He watched that person from outside the window, but the person inside never noticed. He couldn't see Chu Wanning's face, and Chu Wanning couldn't see his.

And so the white cat knelt all night, never turning around.

And so the dumb dog stood all night, never once leaving.

Author's Notes:

Once upon a time there was a little puppy. He was dirty and stupid, so nobody liked him, and thus he could only drift around here and there.

One day, the little puppy was found by his uncle, and was carried back to his nest. The new nest was warm and spacious, the little puppy was very happy about this. Especially the big white cat that was curled up on the cushion sleeping, he looked so gentle. The little puppy howled with an awoo, and joyfully burrowed himself into the white cat's fluff.

However, when awake, the big white cat was very different from his imagination. He always watched the little puppy with icy gaze, likewise ignored the puppy's whimpering affection. When he was unhappy, he wouldn't even remember to retract his claws before swatting the puppy across the face.

Slowly, the little puppy grew up. The big white cat gradually became a small white cat right in front of his eyes.

The big dog wanted to teach the white cat a lesson. And so, he bit into the little white cat's throat, then he proudly trod the ball of snow white under his foot.

He'd originally thought the other animal hard as a rock, but he now suddenly realized this white cat's body was of such softness. He couldn't help but to remember the night when he'd first entered his new nest, when he'd hidden and fallen into a slumber in the warmth and softness of this kitty's fluff.

However he would never find out, that night, the white cat opened his glass-like eyes.

Where had this little thing come from? How dirty...

The white cat thought. And then he used his spiked pink tongue, and quietly groomed the little puppy's fur clean.

The puppy stirred as he was groomed, bleary eyed, and thought that this was all a dream. He dreamed that his drifting life had finally come to end, and there was a big cat that treated him with much, much kindness.

◇ https://seven771.lofter.com/post/2631b4_1c61905ef

[1] 七日回魂 a person's spirit returns to the world of the living on the seventh day after their death

[2] 聘礼 gifts to the bride's family

[3] 红喜 marriage symbol, for fortune and happiness

[4] Engagements are arranged by the parents of the couple before the man goes to the woman's house to propose with betrothal gifts

[5] 大哥 big brother

[6] 小妹 little sister

[7] 阎罗 King of the Underworld

[8] 姐姐 older sister

[9] Proverb, more or less meaning that a death wasn't someone's direct fault, but indirect

[10] 阴阳合欢散 - common name for a type of aphrodisiac in wuxia/xianxia novels

[11] Poem translation from <https://zhidao.baidu.com/question/49775727>

[12] 钗头凤 poem by Song dynasty poet Lu You, who was forced by his mother to leave his wife

[13] 师美人 Shi meiren (beauty), a play on Shi Mei's name

[14] Note that the House of Drunken Jade is a high-class "entertainment house"
cough brothel

[15] 湘潭 city in Hunan

[16] 仙君 xianjun- a respectful form of address for a cultivator

[17] “墨烧? 墨煮? 墨.....鱼?” - he remembered the surname 墨 Mo but couldn't remember the given name; 烧 Shao, meaning to burn/to grill, is close-ish in meaning to his actual name 燃 Ran, meaning to burn/ignite; 煮 Zhu, to boil; 鱼 Yu, fish (Mo Ran's courtesy name is 微雨 Weiyu meaning small/light rain, but Meatbun in her author notes calls him 喂鱼 Weiyu meaning feed fish)... Shizun, are you just hungry?

[18] 坏水 lit. bad waters, refers to vices and wrongdoings.

[19] 黑猫警长 - A famous 80s cartoon from mainland China.

[20] vinegar is sour ;)

[21] 踏仙君 Taxian literally meaning to step on immortals/cultivators

[22] It was commonly believed that, by default, people get reborn after death

[23] 三跪九叩 lit. kneel three times and kowtow nine times, the most respectful formal etiquette on meeting the emperor

[24] 轻功 ability that allows one to be light of foot, used for running/jumping/water treading etc.

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun
Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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"Hey hey, did you guys hear yet? Yuheng Elder's gonna be kneeling at YanLuo Hall for three days as punishment for breaking the rules."

At morning classes the next day, the disciples gathered at the Platform of Sin and Virtue to meditate. These disciples were all rather young, teens and twenty-somethings; something like sitting in meditation, heart at peace like still water, was an impossible task for them, and they chitter-chattered in hushed voices as soon as the teacher looked away.

The news of Chu Wanning getting punished spread like wildfire.

The disciples who'd witnessed it yesterday shared the gossip without reserve.

"Wow, how do you not know about it? Ohh..... had to go collect night dew flowers in the mountain with Lucun Elder yesterday huh? Well——let me tell you what you missed! Last night at Clearsky Hall, blood splattered the ground, utter carnage! Yuheng Elder took over two hundred strikes! Over two hundred! And every hit was brutal too, totally ruthless!"

That disciple punctuated every sentence with an exaggerated expression, quite pleased with himself amidst the gasps of the shidi and shimei gathered around him.

"Can you even imagine two hundred-something strikes of the rod? Even a big sturdy man might not survive that, much less Yuheng Elder. He passed out right then and there! That young master of ours nearly lost his shit, he ran right in there and started brawling with Jielu Elder, wouldn't let him touch so much as a hair on Yuheng Elder, man what a scene that was——"

Face scrunched up like a meatbun in animated excitement, he held up a finger and wagged it in conclusion. "Tsk tsk tsk."

A little shimei paled immediately. "Oh no! Yuheng Elder fainted?"

"The young master seriously fought with Jielu Elder?"

"No wonder Yuheng Elder wasn't at morning classes today.....that's awful.....which rule did he break though?"

"I heard he beat up a client in a fit of rage."

"....."

The idle gossip drifted into Xue Meng's ears now and again. The young master of Sisheng Peak had inherited his Shizun's terrible temper, but unfortunately for him, everyone at the Platform of Sin and Virtue—not just one or two people—was chattering about Yuheng Elder getting punished; the clamor ruffled his feathers but he could do nothing about it.

The vein on Xue Meng's forehead throbbed incessantly, while Mo Ran yawned non-stop, having not slept a wink all night.

Xue Meng had no other outlet, so he grumbled spitefully at Mo Ran, "Morning is the most important time of the day, what are you doing being a lazy mutt first thing in the morning! Is this how Shizun taught you?"

"Hah?" Mo Ran, bleary-eyed, yawned again. "Xue Meng are you that bored or something, Shizun lecturing me is one thing, but who the hell are you? Show your older cousin some respect, you cheeky brat."

Xue Meng said, venomously, "My older cousin is a dog, but hey, if you insist!"

Mo Ran laughed. "What a bad child, being rude to your big bro like this, Shizun would be so disappointed if he knew."

"How do you even have the nerve to bring up Shizun! Why didn't you stop him from going to the Discipline Court yesterday?"

"Mengmeng, that's Shizun you're talking about, Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal? I'd like to see *you* stop him."

Xue Meng exploded with rage, eyebrows drawn together in anger as he leapt to his feet and drew his sword. "The fuck did you just call me?!!"

Mo Ran grinned, cheek in hand. "Mengmeng, be a good boy and sit back down."

Xue Meng roared, "Mo Weiyu, I'm going to kill you!!"

Caught between the two and their routine bickering, Shi Mei let out a long-suffering sigh and rubbed his temples, trying to focus on his book instead. "Fill the vessel day and night; the spiritual core shall be formed in time. The heavenly order is absolute; life and death shall remain separated as the stars of Shen and Shang^[2]....."

Three days passed in a flash. Chu Wanning completed his punishment by kneeling in reflection.

In accordance with the rules, next would be three months of confinement, during which he could not leave Sisheng Peak, and must perform odd jobs like helping out with the chores at Mengpo Hall, cleaning the pillars on Naihe Bridge, sweeping the stairs at the gate, and other such tasks.

Jielu Elder fretted, "Yuheng Elder, to be honest, I think you should just skip this part. You are an eminent cultivation master^[3], after all, things like washing the dishes and wiping the floor...are truly beneath you." He tactfully opted not to voice the rest of his thoughts—

Most importantly, this old man really doubts whether you even know how to do basic functions like sweep the floor, cook a meal, or wash clothes!

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, went to report at Mengpo Hall without even a hint of doubt in his own abilities.

Everyone at Mengpo Hall, from the attendants to the supervisor, all turned pale in fright and alarm upon hearing that Chu Wanning was coming to do chores as punishment, as though a formidable foe cometh.

Chu Wanning arrived, white robes floating.

His handsome face was calm and composed, completely devoid of any expression. Add a cloud beneath his feet and a horsetail whisk in his arm, and he would look no different from the immortals in paintings.

The Mengpo Hall supervisor felt exceedingly awkward and uneasy about having to use such a beautiful man for things like washing veggies and cooking.

But Chu Wanning, totally unaware of his status as a beautiful man, simply stepped into the kitchen. The people working inside couldn't help but take a step back as his cold gaze swept over them.

"....." Chu Wanning got straight to the point. "What should I do?"

The supervisor fiddled sheepishly with the edge of his clothing and thought about it for a while before carefully saying, "Would the Elder mind washing the vegetables?"

Chu Wanning: "Sure."

The supervisor let out a sigh of relief. Originally, he really hadn't thought Chu Wanning's elegant hands were suited for grunt work and that he might be unwilling to do things such as cleaning. However, all the other work that didn't involve getting dirty required some level of skill, and he was worried that Chu Wanning would not be able to manage the tasks well. Seeing that Chu Wanning agreed to wash the vegetables so candidly, he thought he had no more need to worry.

As it turned out, this supervisor was too naive.

There was a small, clear stream in front of Mengpo Hall. Chu Wanning, hugging a basket of deep green cabbage, went up to the stream and rolled his sleeves up to start washing them.

Since this area belonged to Xuanji Elder, his disciples would occasionally pass by. When they saw that Chu Wanning was actually there washing vegetables, they were all shaken to the point of not being able to do anything but stammer out incomplete sentences. After rubbing their eyes three or four times and confirming that, yes, their eyes were not mistaken, they stuttered out, "Y-Yuheng Elder, m-m-morning."

Chu Wanning glanced up. "Morning."

The disciples of Xuanji Elder shook in place and then fled frantically.

"....."

Chu Wanning didn't bother wasting his time with them and just focused on his cabbage, rinsing and then throwing them into the basket.

He washed with utmost seriousness, carefully peeling the cabbage open leaf by leaf and painstakingly washing each one over and over. What resulted from this method was that, by the time noon came around, the basket of cabbages still had yet to be washed.

The attendants waited in the kitchen, pacing back and forth in distress. "What should we do? If he doesn't come back, neither will the cabbage; how are we going to make sautéed beef and greens?"

The supervisor looked at how high the sun was in the sky at this point and said, "Forget it, don't wait anymore; just change the dish to braised beef."

And so, by the time Chu Wanning returned, Mengpo Hall's beef was already stewing in a savory pot and absorbing all of the rich flavors. There was clearly no more need for cabbage. Chu Wanning cradled the cabbage he worked so long on in his arms and frowned unhappily, saying, "Why did you have me wash cabbage if you weren't even going to use it?"

The supervisor broke out into a cold sweat, grabbing some paper to wipe his forehead with. In his panic, he said words that he would end up regretting forever: "That's because, we were hoping the Elder would make a pot of tofu and cabbage stew!"

Chu Wanning held his cabbage expressionlessly, saying nothing but contemplating in silence. "....."

The supervisor added hurriedly, "If the Elder does not want to, that's absolutely fine—"

Before he could finish, Chu Wanning bluntly interjected, "Where is the tofu?"

"...Yuheng Elder, do...you know how to cook?"

"I'm not completely ignorant of it. I can try."

When noon came, the disciples sauntered into Mengpo Hall as they usually did, cheerful and talkative. They found their places in groups of three to five, and went up to the counter for their meals.

The food had always been delicious and rich; they didn't expect today's to be any different.

The braised beef had the perfect fattiness, the savoury shredded pork was rich in color and fragrance, the farmer pork strips were golden and crispy, and the peppered fish was a beautiful and appetizing red. The disciples all rushed in to line up to grab their favorite foods, hoping the chef would give them an extra sweet and sour rib, or add some gravy or chili oil onto their rice.

The fastest in line were always the disciples of Lucun Elder. The youngster in front sported a huge zit on his face, but still eagerly anticipated his mapo tofu. He gingerly carried his tray to the end of the line and said, without even looking up, "Chef, I want a bowl of tofu."

The chef's elegant and pale fingers handed him a generous serving of tofu.

However, it wasn't the mapo tofu he was used to. Instead, it was a bowl of some black substance, an indiscernible mass of abomination.

The disciple stared in alarm. "What the hell is this?"

"Tofu and cabbage stew."

Mengpo Hall started to fill with murmuring. The disciple neglected to take time to recognize the voice of the person who replied, saying angrily, "Were you trying to make some kind of immortality potion?! In what world is this thing tofu and cabbage stew?! I don't want this, take it back!"

In the middle of his tirade, he looked up to glare at the chef, but as soon as he saw who it was standing behind the counter, the disciple shrieked in terror and almost knocked over the entire tray.

"Yu-Yuheng Elder!"

"Mn."

The disciple was nearly in tears. "No, I...that is...I didn't mean that, just now... I..."

"If you won't eat it, hand it back," Chu Wanning said utterly expressionlessly. "Waste not."

The disciple robotically picked up the bowl and stiffly handed it to Chu Wanning, then awkwardly shuffled away.

By now, everyone knew that Yuheng Elder stood at the end of the counter, so the once-lively Mengpo Hall descended into silence.

Like dogs being pulled along by their scruff, the disciples stood properly in line and filled their plates in a panic. They walked deferentially to the end of the counter, stammered out broken greetings to the elder, and then ran off as fast as they could.

"Greetings, Yuheng Elder."

"Mn."

"Good day, Yuheng Elder."

"Good day."

"Thank you for your trouble, Yuheng Elder."

"....."

The disciples were all respectful and cautious to the extreme, so Chu Wanning accepted all of their nervous greetings...but not one of them asked for the tofu and cabbage stew in his pot.

Slowly, the line grew shorter and shorter, and the food in front of all the other chefs was almost gone. Only the pot in front of Chu Wanning was filled to the brim, the food inside gone cold, and still no one wanted any part of it.

Chu Wanning's face betrayed nothing, but he felt some kind of way in his heart. He'd worked hard to wash it for the entire morning...

At this time, his three disciples walked in. Xue Meng, dressed in his usual silver-blue light armor uniform, came over energetically. He happily sidled up to him and said, "Shizun! How are you doing? Do your wounds still hurt?"

"No," Chu Wanning said calmly.

"Then, then that's good," Xue Meng replied.

Chu Wanning glanced at him and said, suddenly, "Do you want to eat tofu?"

"....."

Author's Notes:

Chu Wanning: You want to eat tofu?

Disciple A: N-no.

Chu Wanning: You want to eat tofu?

Disciple B: I-I-I'm allergic to tofu!

Chu Wanning: You want to eat tofu?

Xue Meng: What! ... (Suddenly face and ears turn red) I'm straight! I, I wouldn't eat Shizun's tofu!

Chu Wanning: ... What were you thinking about? Go to Clearsky Hall and reflect upon yourself! Go now! Stop hanging out with Mo Weiyu from now on! (Angrily flips table)

Ch.31 This Venerable One's Uncle

In order to show Shizun his sincerity, the young master of Sisheng Peak asked for three whole servings of charred tofu, and promised to eat every single piece without waste.

Chu Wanning was very pleased, a seldomly-seen approval in his eyes.

Mo Ran, seeing this, was very displeased. Emperor Taxian-Jun had an inexpressible fixation with Chu Wanning's acknowledgement, and immediately asked for three servings of tofu as well. Chu Wanning glanced at him: "Can you eat it all?"

Mo Ran absolutely had to get the better of Xue Meng: "Three servings is nothing, even three more is no problem."

Chu Wanning, mildly: "Alright."

He gave Mo Ran six servings of tofu, and said: "You too, waste not."

Mo Ran: "....."

Since the other two did it, Shi Mei naturally followed suit with a smile: "Then..... Shizun, I'll have three servings as well."

And so, on the first day of Yuheng Elder's period of confinement, all three of his disciples got the runs from food poisoning. On the second day, Jielu Elder sought out Chu Wanning and tactfully conveyed that Mengpo Hall had no need for extra helpers, and to please go sweep the fallen leaves and wipe the pillars at Naihe Bridge instead.

Naihe Bridge connected the main areas of Sisheng Peak with the disciples' living quarters, wide enough for five horse carriages to pass through side by side. It was a majestic structure, with nine beasts of white jade representing the nine sons of the dragon^[4] atop its main pillars, and three hundred and sixty low pillars decorated with lion heads.

Chu Wanning quietly swept the ground, then set about diligently wiping down the jade beasts.

The task took most of the day. As the sky started getting dark, it began to rain.

Most of the disciples returning from their classes didn't have umbrellas, squawking as they scampered toward their quarters, splashing through water puddles on the ground. Drops of rain pitter-pattered on the stone steps. Chu Wanning glanced at the disciples in the distance, the young boys and girls were drenched through and through but the smiles on their faces were bright and carefree.

"....." Chu Wanning knew that those smiles would vanish the moment they saw him; he looked around, and went to stand under the bridge.

The disciples who ran ahead and arrived at the bridge first couldn't help uttering "eh?" as they took in the sight before them.

"A barrier?"

"Why is there a barrier over Naihe Bridge?"

"It was probably set up by Xuanji Elder." One of the disciples guessed, "Xuanji Elder is always so nice to us."

The translucent golden barrier covered Naihe Bridge, extending resplendent all the way to the main walkway of the disciples' quarters, sheltering them from the rain the rest of the way.

"This is definitely Xuanji Elder's work, he's in charge of this area right?"

"Xuanji Elder is the best."

"What a pretty barrier, Xuanji Elder is incredible."

The disciples shook the water out of their dripping hair, shoving playfully at one another and laughing as they ducked under the barrier and continued toward their quarters, chattering the whole way.

Chu Wanning stood under the bridge, listening as the commotion above passed by, until the disciples were all gone and everything became quiet once more, before slowly putting away the barrier and leisurely walking out.

"Shizun."

He was surprised to hear someone calling for him.

Chu Wanning looked up abruptly, but there was no one on the shore.

"I'm over here."

Following the voice, he saw Mo Ran sitting sideways on the white jade bridge, dressed in the customary silver-blue light armor of the sect, a leg draped lazily over the edge.

The youth had striking features, eyelashes long and thick like a little pair of fans hanging over his eyes. He held an oil paper umbrella, and almost seemed to be smiling, yet also not, as he gazed at Chu Wanning.

One on the bridge, leaves rustling in the wind; one under the bridge, rain splashing in the river.

For a moment, neither spoke, both simply looking at the other.

The misty rain blurred the line between heaven and earth almost poignantly. Fallen bamboo leaves drifted between the two of them now and again, carried by the wind and rain

Finally, Mo Ran laughed and said teasingly: "Xuanji Elder, you're getting drenched."

Chu Wanning spoke at nearly the same time, coldly: "How did you know it was me?"

Mo Ran pressed his lips together, dimples deep and eyes curved in a smile: "A barrier this big is beyond Xuanji Elder, right? Who else could it be but Shizun?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran knew that he couldn't be bothered to put up a barrier for himself, but an idea popped into his head, and he tossed the umbrella over.

"I'll give this to you, catch."

The bright red paper umbrella drifted slowly down. Chu Wanning caught it. The glossy, jade-green bamboo handle still held a remainder of warmth, droplets of rain sliding along the top of the umbrella and sparkling as they fell. Chu Wanning looked up at him: "Then what about you?"

Mo Ran grinned deviously: "Won't I get back perfectly fine if Shizun just uses a little spell?"

Chu Wanning let out a hmpf, but his hand waved lightly in his sleeve nevertheless, a translucent golden barrier spreading out immediately above Mo Ran. He looked up and laughed: "Haha, how pretty, it's even got peony patterns. Thanks."

Chu Wanning shot him a look: "Those are haitang flowers, only five petals."

Then he left, white robes under a scarlet umbrella, leaving Mo Ran in the rain to count the flower petals by himself: "One, two, three, four, five..... ah, it really does only have five petals....."

When he looked back up, Chu Wanning had already walked far away.

Standing under the barrier, Mo Ran narrowed his eyes, the childlike grin on his face slowly fading away to be replaced by a complicated expression.

He didn't understand just what he was thinking about, all of a sudden.

If only his feelings toward another could be simply fondness or simply loathing.

The rain didn't stop for four days. When the clouds parted at last, an entourage of horses and carriages, bells jingling, splashed through the water puddles, breaking apart the skies and clouds reflected on the ground, and stopped in front of Sisheng Peak's main gate.

The bamboo screen lifted up, and a folding fan with a red tassel peeked out from inside.

Immediately after, a pair of silver-trimmed blue battle boots stepped out onto the ground with a heavy thump, sending dust flying.

It was a burly man with thick eyebrows, big eyes, and a full, well-kept beard, about forty years of age, wearing a full set of silver-blue light armor. He looked gruff, but those large hands waved a delicate, scholarly fan, making for quite the strange sight.

The fan opened with a pop. On the side facing others was written——

"Xue is beautiful."

But on the side facing himself was written——
"Others are ugly."

This fan was known throughout the realm, both for the martial prowess of its owner and the extreme awkwardness of the writing on it.

One side boasted about the owner, while the other side mocked everybody else.

A light wave of the fan, and everyone within a hundred li^[5] could smell the owner's narcissism. Every single person in the cultivation realm knew of this fan.

But who was the owner? It was none other than the master of Sisheng Peak who had been away for more than two months, Xue Meng's father, Mo Ran's uncle, Sir Xue, Xue Zhengyong.

The saying went that dragons bear dragons, phoenixes bear phoenixes, a mouse's son digs holes.

It was just as true in reverse: the old man of a peacock son was just as prone to showing off his tail feathers.

Xue Meng's delicate looks were completely different from his brawny old man, but the same stuff ran in their bones——

Both felt that "Xue is beautiful, others are ugly."

Xue Zhengyong stretched, shook his limbs out, cracked his neck, and grinned: "Aiyo, finally home, my ass is numb from all that sitting."

Inside Loyalty Hall, Madam Wang was busy blending medicine, with Mo Ran and Xue Meng sitting by her sides.

She said softly: "Four taels^[6] of staunching herbs, and a shouyang ginseng, please."

"Here you go, Mom, already weighed." Xue Meng handed the herbs over from where he sat cross-legged next to her. Madam Wang held the staunching herbs up for a smell, and said, "These are no good, they've been tainted from being stored with patchouli for too long, the decoction won't be as effective using these. Please go fetch some fresh ones."

"Alrighty." Xue Meng got up to go dig through the medicine cabinet in the inner room.

Madam Wang continued: "Three qian^[7] of wulingzhi, and one qian of dodder."

Mo Ran passed the materials over deftly: "Aunt, how long will it take to boil the medicine?"

"No need to boil, this one can just be brewed." Madam Wang answered, "When I'm done grinding the medicine, could A-Ran bring it over to Yuheng Elder?"

Mo Ran didn't want to at first, but shooting a glance in Xue Meng's direction, he knew that if he didn't do it, then Xue Meng would.

For some reason, he simply disliked the idea of Xue Meng spending time alone with Chu Wanning, so he said: "Sure."

A pause, then he asked: "Oh yeah, is it bitter?"

"Somewhat. Why do you ask?"

Mo Ran grinned: "No reason." But he grabbed a handful of candy from the fruit bowl and stuffed it into his sleeve.

The people inside the hall were hard at work making the medicine when suddenly a burst of bold, unrestrained laughter came from the door. Xue Zhengyong strode into the hall, grinning radiantly: "Wifey, I'm back! Hahahaha!"

He arrived completely unannounced despite his status as the sect master, startling Madam Wang so much that she nearly spilled all the powdered medicine in her spoon. Her pretty eyes widened: "Husband?"

Mo Ran also stood up in greeting: "Uncle."

"Ah, Ran-er is here too?" Xue Zhengyong's appearance was powerful and imposing, but his manner of speech was kindly. His big hand smacked Mo Ran's shoulder, "My boy, I haven't been gone that long, did you get taller again? How'd it go at Butterfly Town?"

Mo Ran grinned: "Went alright."

"Good, good good good! I knew nothing could go wrong with Chu Wanning there, hahahaha—oh yeah, where is he by the way? Cooped up by himself fiddling with those playthings again?"

Hearing that, Mo Ran was a little uneasy: "Uh, Shizun....."

His uncle had a fiery temperament, and was prone to acting impulsively. His death in the last lifetime was mostly caused by this temperament of his. Of course Mo Ran didn't want to directly tell him that Chu Wanning ate two hundred strikes and got confined for three months on top. He was just pondering how to break the news when an "ah" came from behind him.

Xue Meng had returned holding a pile of staunching herbs in his arms, and was ecstatic to see his father: "Dad!"

"Meng-er!"

Mo Ran secretly let out a sigh of relief. Any time this father and son pair met, a bout of mutual flattering was unavoidable, which gives him plenty of time to think of a way to tactfully break the news about Chu Wanning getting punished.

Sure enough, the pair of peacock father and son spread their tail feathers and busied themselves plastering each other with praise.

"My son got even more handsome in these last two months! You're looking more and more like daddy!"

Xue Meng took entirely after his mom and looked nothing like his dad, but he took his word for it: "And dad got even buffer!"

Xue Zhengyong waved his big hand, grinning: "The whole time I was at Kunlun Taxue Palace, I kept thinking about how none of the youngsters out there can even hold a candle to my son and nephew! Aiyo, I got so tired of looking at that gaggle of femmy boys. Meng-er, do you still remember Mei Hanxue?""

Xue Meng immediately took on a look of contempt: "The chubby one that's been training in seclusion for like a dozen years, I heard he's the eldest disciple of Taxue Palace? Did he finally come out?"

"Hahaha, what a good memory, that's him. The kid stayed with us for a while way back when, you two even shared a bed."

“.....How could i forget, fat like a dog, and kicked in his sleep too. I got kicked off the bed so many times. You saw him?”

“I saw him, I saw him.” Xue Zhengyong twirled his beard, and seemed to be musing about something. Xue Meng was the darling of the heavens, competitive to a fault, and asked impatiently: “And?”

Xue Zhengyong laughed: “Of course you’re better. The boy’s master taught him stuff like instruments and dance for some godforsaken reason, even just using qinggong made flower petals fly everywhere, your dad almost died laughing, hahahaha!”

Xue Meng wrinkled his nose, as if disgusted.

A little porky with baby fat, playing instruments and dancing while petals fluttered about.....

“Then how’s his cultivation?” Mei Hanxue had trained in seclusion for more than ten years, after all; he only just came out these last few months, and hadn’t made much noise in the world yet.

Since he already won in terms of “looks”, Xue Meng was going to compare “cultivation” next.

Xue Zhengyong didn’t answer immediately this time. He thought for a while, then said: “I didn’t get to see his skills much. No matter, Meng-er will surely get to cross swords with him at the Spiritual Mountain Competition anyway.”

Xue Meng’s eyebrow twitched: “Hmph, who knows if that stupid porky will even get to challenge me.”

Madam Wang finished blending the medicine and got up, patting Xue Meng’s head with a smile: “Meng-er must not be so arrogant, remember to be modest and respectful.”

Xue Meng said: “What’s the point in being modest? That’s for weaklings, I’d rather be forthright like dad.”

Xue Zhengyong chortled: “See, this tiger dad ain’t got no pup for a son.”

Madam Wang was displeased: “This is all your doing, teaching him all these bad habits and none of the good, I can’t believe you.”

Xue Zhengyong saw irritation in her expression, and knew that she really was a bit unhappy. He immediately checked his grin, scratching his head: “Wifey, I was wrong. We’ll go by whatever wifey says, don’t be mad~”

Mo Ran: “.....”

Xue Meng: “.....”

Madam Wang was a disciple of Guyue’ye in her early years, and rumor had it that Xue Zhengyong stole her. Who knows if that rumor was true or not, but what Mo Ran does know is that his uncle is deeply in love with his aunt, so much so that his bones of iron would turn into soft threads to wrap around her finger. But Madam Wang was not quite so passionate toward her husband; she was a gentle person, but would often get mad at him over little things.

The years went by bumpily like this. Anyone with eyes could see who felt more deeply for the other between this couple.

Of course Xue Meng wasn’t gonna hang around to watch his own parents flirt. A little grossed out, he clicked his tongue and turned to leave.

Madam Wang was quite embarrassed, hurriedly calling: “Meng-er?”

Xue Meng waved his hand and left briskly.

Mo Ran also didn't want to cut into the couple's reunion, and used this excuse to conveniently dodge his uncle's questions as well. The topic of Chu Wanning's punishment was better brought up by Madam Wang, after all. He sure didn't want to be the one to deal with it. After collecting the medicine on the table, he made his escape with a smile on his face, even closing the door for them.

Medicine in hand, he strolled leisurely over to the Red Lotus Pavilion.

Chu Wanning's body was weak these days due to his injury, so he took down the barriers that usually surrounded the pavilion. Thus he had no way of knowing if someone came in.

And so, it was under these circumstances that Mo Ran saw this scene.....

Chu Wanning, bathing in the lotus pond.

It would've been one thing if he was just bathing by himself, but in that lotus pond for the sole use of the virtuous and incorruptible Yuheng Elder, were the silhouettes of two other people.....

Ch.32 This Venerable One Will Baby You a Bit, Will That Do

>>blood + injury care

Behind the myriad of lotus leaves, Mo Ran stood appalled and unmoving as if he'd been struck by lightning. Something inside of him shattered, and it showed in the cracked expression on his face.

Shock, indignation, jealousy, and irritation exploded like fireworks in his head. He moved his lips, but no words came out. He didn't even know what he was raging over. Only one thought ran through his mind——

How dare anyone else touch that which has been claimed by this venerable one?!

Chu Wanning, you two-faced, cheating whore! You dare...you dare to.....

He forgot that the Chu Wanning of this era had no intimate relations with him at all. In that moment, all sense left his mind.

It had been ten years—a lifetime, from birth to death—after all.
He could set it aside and maintain control when he was lucid.

But under these circumstances, with his head in disarray, he subconsciously felt that Chu Wanning was his. Only now did he realize just how clearly he remembered even the taste of Chu Wanning's lips, to say nothing of the passion and desire as they entwined, the ecstasy that ate at his very being.....

After he'd been reborn, he did everything he could to not think about those things.

But now, seeing Chu Wanning's naked back, that familiar figure with broad shoulders and long legs, taut muscles, and a slender but strong waist submerged in the clear water...

All the memories and emotions he tried so hard to suppress rushed back without warning.

Even Mo Ran's scalp went numb.

.....His body, too, reacted to these things.

It was the kind of involuntary reaction so fierce he could do nothing to stop it, and his lower body burned as he watched.

By the time he realized what he was doing, he was already raising his voice angrily and shouting, "Chu Wanning!"

Chu Wanning actually had the gall to ignore him.

It was hard to see the two people supporting his shoulders because of the mist settled on top of the lotus pond, so he couldn't make out their appearances. But they stood extremely close to him, the distance between them barely distinguishable.

Mo Ran hollered and barged right into the pond, wading through the water towards Chu Wanning—and as he grew closer, he realized—

Those, those two “people” were actually golems made of metal and cedarwood!

Even worse, it seemed like they had been using the lotus pond to transfer energy to Chu Wanning, and Mo Ran had broken the spiritual bounding field when he recklessly rushed into the water.....

He wasn't sure what kind of array Chu Wanning was using, but he was in an unconscious daze and leaning against the golems as light continuously poured through their palms into the wound on his shoulder. Looking back on the situation, he was clearly in the middle of healing himself.

When Mo Ran rushed through the boundary, the light dispersed. To his horror, the array actually started to reverse.

As soon as the light scattered, Chu Wanning's wound began to quickly eat away at itself. He frowned, letting out a noise of discomfort, and coughed up a mouthful of blood. Then, all the scars on his body began to tear open again. The blood that poured out drenched the pool red in an instant.

Mo Ran was dumbfounded.

This was Chu Wanning's “Flower Spirit Sacrifice Technique”!

He realized that he might have...made a grave error.....

Chu Wanning's spiritual energy was of both the metal and wood elementals^[8]. Metal element spiritual energy, including “Tianwen”, was used for offense, while wood element spiritual energy was used for healing.

The Flower Spirit Sacrifice Technique was one such; Chu Wanning could manipulate the spiritual essence of flora to mend wounds. However, if anyone else was to enter the array during this process, the flora spirits would immediately scatter, and not only would there be no healing effect, it would conversely worsen the injury. In the worst case, the flora spirits could even devour Chu Wanning's spiritual core.

Fortunately, Mo Ran had a passing familiarity with the Flower Spirit Sacrifice Technique from the last lifetime, and he acted immediately to cut off the flow of energy. Having lost the support of the golems holding him up, Chu Wanning tipped forward. Mo Ran caught him and held him steady.

Shizun's unconscious face was pale, lips blue, body as cold as ice.

Without thinking about much else, Mo Ran lifted him out of the pool. Half carrying and half dragging, he took Chu Wanning back to his room and placed him on his bed.

“Shizun? Shizun!”

He called several times, but Chu Wanning didn't move so much as an eyelash. He looked no different from the dead, save for the shallow rise and fall of his chest.

Seeing Chu Wanning like this reminded Mo Ran of the past.

Inexplicably, he felt his throat close up and his heart start to panic.

In his past life, two people died in his arms.

Shi Mei. Chu Wanning.

One was the love of his life whom he thought about day and night. The other was his mortal enemy whom he had entwined with for a lifetime.

When Shi Mei died, Mo Weiyu disappeared from the world.
And when Chu Wanning died.....?

Mo Ran didn't know. All he knew was the feeling of the person in his arms slowly growing colder and colder on that day. He didn't cry, nor did he laugh; joy and sorrow both grew out of reach.

When Chu Wanning died, Mo Weiyu no longer knew what the world even was anymore.

By the candle light, he saw Chu Wanning's bare torso.

Usually, Yuheng of the Night Sky wore clothing that showed as little skin as possible. He wore high collars and wrapped his belt sash around three times, a picture of dignity and propriety.

Because of this, no one even saw what kind of injury those two hundred strikes had left on his body.....

Even though Mo Ran had seen the wounds on Chu Wanning's back with his own eyes on the day of the punishment, all he knew was that his flesh had suffered severe damage. Seeing Chu Wanning on his feet and walking around like normal in the days afterwards, he thought it couldn't have been that bad after all.

Now he realized that Chu Wanning's wounds were far worse than he had imagined.

The five wounds left by the ghost mistress were torn open, and in the worst parts he could see all the way through to the bone.

Chu Wanning probably never asked anyone to help him change his bandages, and tried to do everything by himself. The salve wasn't evenly applied, and the places he couldn't reach were already infected and festering.

Not to mention all the blue-purple bruises from the rod strikes. They spread out across his entire back, leaving no part of his mottled skin unbroken. On top of them, the torn scars from the spiritual rebound earlier washed his back in blood. It flowed ceaselessly, drenching the sheets under him in red.

If Mo Ran hadn't seen it with his own eyes, he would never have believed that the man who had insisted on wiping down pillars near the bridge and creating a huge barrier to shield disciples from the rain was this—this same man in front of him whose wounds were so severe and terrible he belonged in an infirmary, under intensive care.

If not for the fact that Chu Wanning was unconscious, Mo Ran would have really liked to grab his collar and shake him, demanding——

Chu Wanning, what the hell is wrong with you and your stupid pride?

What's anyone going to do if you show a little weakness for once in your life? Why are you so fucking stubborn? You're a grown man, and you won't even take care of yourself? Treat yourself a little better??

Why didn't you ask anyone to help you dress your wounds?!

How come you'd rather make golems to use your stupid healing system than to just open your mouth and call for help?!

Chu Wanning, are you a fucking moron?!

As he cursed him in his head, he worked quickly to staunch the bleeding. Then he drew a pail of warm water and wiped the blood from Chu Wanning's back.....

Sterilizing a knife in the flame, he set about cutting off the flesh that had completely decayed.

At the first cut, Chu Wanning groaned in pain, body jerking. Mo Ran held him down and muttered heatedly, "The hell do you have to groan about! Gonna curse me out? If you utter another sound I'll stab this knife right through your chest. You won't feel a goddamn thing once you're dead! Problem solved!"

It was only now that Mo Ran could let his real, vehement nature show though, yelling at him like he did in the past.

But there were too many wounds that had festered, the skin gone white and dead. Chu Wanning breathed heavily as he hacked away at it little by little.

Even unconscious, this person stifled his voice and refused to cry out in pain, but he broke out into a cold sweat, drenching the body that had just been wiped clean.

After what felt like hours, Mo Ran finally finished applying medicine and bandaging the wounds.

He helped Chu Wanning into some robes, then found a thick quilt and laid it over his feverish Shizun, and only then did he sigh in relief. Remembering Madam Wang's medicine that was still sealed in a paper bag, he got up and brewed a bowl of medicine, carrying it back to Chu Wanning's bedside.

"Come on, time for your medicine."

With one hand, he lifted the sleeping person up into his arms and leaned him against his shoulder. He used the other to bring the bowl of medicine to his lips, lightly blowing the steam off and taking a sip to test it first.

Mo Ran grimaced and made a face. "Ugh, so bitter." Still, he let it cool off and fed it to Chu Wanning.

But he only got half a spoonful in before Chu Wanning couldn't handle it and coughed it all out, getting most of it on Mo Ran's clothes.

.....

He knew that Chu Wanning didn't like bitter things, so much so that it could be said he hated bitter things.

But Yuheng Elder was stubborn as a mule; if he was awake, he would definitely endure it and drain the whole bowl in one gulp without complaint. At most, he'd discreetly sneak a piece of candy afterwards.

Unfortunately, Chu Wanning was currently unconscious.

There was nothing to be done about it; it's not like he could lose his temper at an unconscious person. He just had to suck it up and patiently feed him small mouthfuls, even using a towel to wipe the corners of his mouth at times.

Something like this wasn't difficult for Mo Ran. After all, in his past life, there was a period of time when he'd fed medicine to Chu Wanning like this every day. Back then, Chu Wanning had even tried to resist him, so he would slap him across the face before seizing him by the jaw and pressing their lips together roughly, tongue pushing past to ravish his mouth, the coppery scent of blood.....

In an effort to stop thinking about that as quickly as possible, the last few spoonfuls that Mo Ran fed him were a little rushed, and most of it ended up being coughed out again. Then he laid him back down in the bed, and tucked him in none-too-gently.

"I'm doing this out of the generosity of my heart. Don't you dare kick this quilt off in the night, you're already feverish and you'll catch a cold....."

Halfway through his speech, his temper suddenly flared up and he kicked the leg of the bed.

"Whatever, why should I care if you catch a cold or not! I hope you do. I hope it's terrible and you die from it."

He turned around and stalked off.

He got to the door, but had a feeling he still couldn't put to rest, so he turned back and squinted into the room. After figuring out what was bothering him, he

went over and blew the candle out. Then he left again.

This time, he got all the way to the lotus pond. Seeing the flowers that had grown and bloomed after absorbing Chu Wanning's life blood, the irritation in his heart only worsened.

He was filled with aggravation, but still marched, stiffly, out of rhythm, with arm and leg on the same side moving together, back into the bedroom.

Clanking like a rusty, old golem, he dragged his feet in a circle around the entire room until he finally, reluctantly, came to stand at Chu Wanning's bedside.

Moonlight shone in softly from the half-open bamboo window, illuminating Chu Wanning's peaceful face.

His lips were pale, and his eyebrows were slightly drawn together.

Mo Ran considered it for a while, then shut the window for him. They live in a humid place, after all; it isn't good for health to leave the window open while sleeping. After doing this, Mo Ran put his foot down and swore:

If he comes back through that door one more time, he will be a dog!

Just as he reached the doorway, he heard a thump. Chu Wanning actually tossed the entire quilt off of himself.

"....."

What's he going to do about this person's habit of throwing off his covers when sleeping??

So that he wouldn't be a dog, the sixteen-year-old Emperor Taxian-Jun endured the situation with much tolerance and left.

He will not go back on his word; he absolutely will not go back through that door again!

So, after a while.

—The brilliant and powerful emperor opened the window and vaulted into the room that way.

He picked up the quilt off the ground and laid it back over Chu Wanning. Hearing Chu Wanning's pained, labored breathing and seeing his back shuddering where he was curled into the corner of the bed, Mo Ran couldn't muster up any of the anger he usually held toward him.

He could say "serves you right" all he wanted, but his heart still ached for him.

He sat by Chu Wanning's bedside, keeping watch to make sure he doesn't throw the quilt off again.

Late as it was, with the long day Mo Ran had had, the exhaustion finally settled in. His head slowly drooped, and he dozed off.

This sleep wasn't restful in the slightest. Chu Wanning kept tossing and turning, and Mo Ran could hear him groaning under his breath through the haze of slumber.

In his hazy, light sleep, Mo Ran couldn't tell what hour it was, or when he had ended up lying next to Chu Wanning on the bed, hugging the trembling man in his arms. Still half asleep, he held him and gently stroked his back, murmuring, "Shh... shh... pain pain go away..."

In his sleep, Mo Ran felt as if he had returned to the Sisheng Peak in his past life, to the empty, somber Wushan Palace.

After Chu Wanning's death, he never slept holding anyone ever again.

Whether because of the burning resentment or lingering feelings, thinking about those emotions in the endlessly cold days of loneliness afterwards made his heart hurt. Wishful thinking consumed him.

But no matter how hard he wished for it, Chu Wanning wasn't coming back.

He had lost the last flame of his life.

Mo Ran held Chu Wanning the entire night. Between the dreams and the haze of sleep, at times he knew clearly that he had been reborn, yet felt as if he was still in his past life at others.

Suddenly, he was almost afraid to open his eyes. He was afraid that when he woke up in the morning, it would be to a cold, empty pillow and drafty curtains. And, for the rest of his life, he would be utterly alone.

He was certain that he hated Chu Wanning.

But, holding him in his arms, he felt wetness gather at the corners of his eyes.

This was a warmth that the thirty-two year old Taxian-Jun once thought he would never have again.

"Wanning, you'll be okay....."

It was in this hazy state, stroking the hair of the man in his arms as if he were the Mo Ran of the past, that such a tender phrase escaped his mouth.

He was so tired that he didn't realize what he had said, or what he'd called the other person. The words slipped out naturally and he didn't think much on them. Mo Ran breathed out, and fell into a deeper slumber.

The next morning, Chu Wanning's eyelashes fluttered as he slowly came to.

Because of his strong cultivation, the high fever he had last night already receded.

Chu Wanning idly opened his eyes, mind still foggy with sleep. But when he tried to get up, he found that there was someone else lying in bed with him.

M-Mo Weiyu???

He was startled to say the least. Chu Wanning paled, but couldn't for the life of him remember what happened the night before. Even worse, his movements woke Mo Ran up too.

The young man yawned, youthful face lightly flushed from sleep. He squinted into the morning light, glanced over at Chu Wanning and said vaguely, "Ah.....let this Venerable One sleep for a while longer.....Since you're already awake, why don't you go make me egg and meat congee....."

"....."

What kind of nonsense was this? Sleeptalking?

Mo Ran's mind was still fuzzy. When he saw that Chu Wanning was not getting up to make him breakfast, he didn't press the matter. Instead, he smiled lazily and reached out, pulling Chu Wanning's face closer, and pressed a chaste kiss to his lips.

"If you don't want to get up, that's fine too. This Venerable One just had the most terrible dream. In it.....ah.....nevermind." He sighed, hugging the person who had gone stock still by this point. He rested his chin against the head of the man in his arms, muttering, "Chu Wanning, let me hold you a little while longer."

Author's Notes:

Candy candy candy, the candy that you asked for!

About why Mo Ran calls him 【Wanning】 , it's not a slip of the tongue, he really called Shizun this later in his past life. As for why he would address him with such intimacy, to be continued in... uh, donno how many chapters later! Runs away.

Ch.33 This Venerable One Is Off to Fetch His Weapon

Chu Wanning was so shocked by the sudden kiss that he couldn't even process what Mo Ran was saying. It all sounded like a distant murmur to him, as if a heavy rain had started to pour down against his head.

Mo Ran, on the other hand, obviously muttered a few more words and fell back to sleep.

“.....”

Chu Wanning wanted to shake him awake.

But there was a haitang tree swaying in full bloom outside the window. Just as Chu Wanning lifted his hand, a light pink flower petal landed gently on the tip of Mo Ran's nose.

“.....”

Mo Ran rubbed his nose a little in discomfort, but was sleeping so sweetly that he didn't wake up. The arm Chu Wanning stretched out to shove him changed its course, for no reason discernible to himself, and picked up the flower petal between his fingers to examine it.

As he lost himself in thought staring at the petal, some things slowly came back to him.

He remembered that, yesterday, Mo Ran had dressed his wounds and fed him medicine.

Afterwards, Mo Ran held him in his arms, gently stroking his hair and back long into the night and whispering softly into his ear.

Chu Wanning was baffled. That had to be a dream, right?

The tips of his ears went red, the bright color not unlike the haitang petal between his fingers.

The scolding words died in his throat.

He really.....didn't even know how to start.

“How did you end up in my bed?”

That sounds like a young maiden who had made a mistake.

“Get the hell out, who let you sleep here!”

That sounds like a she-devil who had made a miscalculation.

“How dare you kiss me?!”

If one really thought about it, it was only the touch of two lips. Compared to that time in the illusion, it could barely even be called a kiss. Making a fuss out of it would only make it look like he really did have something to hide.

“.....”

Yuheng Elder, at a complete loss, could only roll over and bury his face into the quilt. His slender fingers grasped at its corner in irritation and embarrassment.

In the end, he decided to pry Mo Ran off of himself, sit up and get immaculately dressed first, and then shake the other awake.

And so, when Mo Ran blearily opened his eyes, the sight that greeted him was that of Yuheng Elder sitting on the edge of the bed with an unreadable, chilly look on his face.

He broke into a cold sweat immediately.

“Shizun, I——”

Chu Wanning responded expressionlessly, “You broke my Flora Spirit Boundary yesterday?”

“I didn’t mean to.....”

“Forget it,” Chu Wanning said curtly and waved his hand like it was nothing. “You should get up. Morning classes.”

Mo Ran was about to lose it. He scratched his head in agitation: “How did I fall asleep here.....”

“You look tired,” Chu Wanning was perfectly calm. “Doesn’t look like you got much rest yesterday.”

He glanced at the medicine on the table and said, “In the future, don’t barge into Red Lotus Pavilion on your own. If you need something, tell me in advance.”

“Yes, Shizun.”

“You may leave.”

Taxian-Jun felt like he’d narrowly escaped death, and hurried to run as far away as possible.

After he left, Chu Wanning lay back down on his bed and lifted his arm up, stretching out his hand. From the space between his fingers, he watched as the radiant blossoms outside of his window drifted and fell like snow in the wind.

The soft colors of the haitang petals were just like the hazy memories of last night.

Delicate. Hard to distinguish truth from wishful thinking.

He decided that he’d rather die before ever bringing up what happened yesterday.

It was far too embarrassing!!!

Yuheng Elder cared about his pride above all else; he’d rather save his face than his life. So the next time Mo Ran saw Chu Wanning a few days later, Yuheng Elder was elegant and composed in the usual manner, white robes billowing gracefully.

Neither of them brought up that night. But sometimes when their eyes met, Mo Ran’s gaze seemed to linger on Chu Wanning a bit longer before habitually chasing after Shi Mei.

And what about Chu Wanning?

As soon as his gaze met Mo Ran’s, he would turn away immediately and coldly. But then, when he thought Mo Ran wasn’t looking, he would steal another glance as if entirely by accident.

Xue Zhengyong quickly found out about Chu Wanning’s punishment.

As expected, the master of Sisheng Peak was protective to a fault, and immediately threw a fit. But he couldn’t rightfully direct it at anyone in particular, and could only close his door and sulk by himself.

——If he had known that this would happen when they first made the rules, he would’ve added one more: the rules don’t apply to the elders.

Madam Wang steeped a pot of tea and spoke soothingly with Xue Zhengyong for quite a while before he finally calmed down. He said: "Yuheng Elder is really too stubborn, if he tries to do this again in the future, please help me talk him out of it. The sects of the upper cultivation realm couldn't even beg him into joining them, but such an eminent cultivation master ended up suffering like this over here, how am I to live with myself?"

Madam Wang sighed: "It's not that I didn't try. You know how he is, stubborn to a fault."

Xue Zhengyong said: "Ah, forget it. Wifey, give me some of those painkillers and tissue-regrowth medicines you made, I'm gonna go check on Yuheng."

"The white one is to be taken orally, the red one is for applying externally." Madam Wang gave him two small porcelain bottles, then said, "Ran-er mentioned that Yuheng Elder's been wiping down the lions at Naihe Bridge lately, you should be able to find him there."

Xue Zhengyong tucked the bottles into his pocket and rushed over to the jade bridge.

Chu Wanning was indeed there. It was shortly past noon, the disciples were all busy practicing their cultivation, and few people passed by Naihe Bridge. Chu Wanning stood alone on the gentle curve of the bridge, his figure tall and straight.

Leaves rustled softly on the shores; his white robes amongst the graceful bamboo was a picture of refinement.

Xue Zhengyong walked over, grinning: "Yuheng Elder, watching the fish?"

Chu Wanning's face turned his way: "Sect Leader must be joking, this river connects to the yellow springs of the Underworld, there is no fish."

"Haha, just pulling your leg. You're all elegance no humor, I really worry about how you're gonna find a wife!"

Chu Wanning: "....."

"Here, medicine. My wife made them. Take the white one orally, apply the red one externally. Super effective. For you."

"....." Chu Wanning didn't want it at first, but seeing how proud Xue Zhengyong was, as if his wife's medicine was the most precious thing, he couldn't refuse, so he accepted with a mild "Thanks."

Xue Zhengyong was a crude man, but he was rather more reserved in front of Chu Wanning, and did not simply blurt things out. He thought for a bit before settling on a topic: "Say, Yuheng, the Spiritual Mountain Competition is coming up in three years. Young talents from every sect will gather to vie for the top. What do you think Meng-er and Ran-er's odds are?"

Chu Wanning replied: "Three years is a long time; I can't say at the present. But right now, Mo Ran lacks the drive to improve, and Xue Meng is overly conceited and prone to underestimating his opponents. Neither has the right attitude."

His words were blunt and cutting, straight to the heart of the matter.

Xue Zhengyong was a little embarrassed, mumbling: "Aiya, they're just young....."

Chu Wanning said: "They've already come of age, not young anymore."

Xue Zhengyong: "You're not wrong, but still, they're not even twenty yet, I can't help being a little biased as their father and uncle, haha."

Chu Wanning: "An undisciplined child is the fault of a neglectful father and an irresponsible teacher. If the two of them end up walking the wrong path in the future, that blame will fall directly on you and I. How will you be biased then?"

“.....”

Chu Wanning continued: “Does the Sect Leader still remember Linyi Rufeng Sect’s two darlings of the heavens^[9] some years back?”

Xue Zhengyong’s heart dropped at the mere mention.

Twenty-some years ago, there were a pair of brothers from Rufeng Sect, the foremost sect of the upper cultivation realm. The both of them were immensely gifted and exceedingly skilled at a young age; by the age of ten they could each individually take down hundred-year old demons, and by fifteen, they were already capable of devising new spells and even starting their own sect had they so desired.

But the cultivation world wasn’t big enough for the both of them. The brothers were both far too exceptional, and eventually ended up falling out with one another. At the Spiritual Mountain Competition that year, the younger brother even stole the older brother’s secretly-developed technique, and was censured by all sects and scorned by every elder for it. As soon as the competition ended, the younger brother was immediately punished by their father. His pride couldn’t bear it. Henceforth he bore a deep grudge and cultivated in unscrupulous methods, and in the end became a crazed monster.

To bring this up now, Chu Wanning was undoubtedly trying to remind Xue Zhengyong that Xue Meng and Mo Ran may be exceptional, but the heart was far more important than skill.

Unfortunately, Xue Zhengyong was hard on himself, serious with his disciples, but hopelessly addled when it came to his son and his nephew, to the point of spoiling them. So he didn’t really take Chu Wanning’s words to heart, only laughing as he said: “They won’t end up like those brothers with Yuheng Elder guiding their way.”

Chu Wanning shook his head.

“Human nature is set, not so easily changed without tremendous resolve.”

Xue Zhengyong couldn’t help feeling a little uneasy at Chu Wanning’s words, unsure if they had a hidden meaning. He hesitated for a while, but ended up asking after all: “Yuheng, do you..... aie, don’t get mad, but do you perhaps look down on that dumb nephew of mine?”

Chu Wanning hadn’t meant that at all. The unexpected misunderstanding caught him so off guard that his words choked up in his throat.

Xue Zhengyong continued worriedly: “Actually, I don’t really care if they come out on top at the competition or not. Especially Ran-er, it really wasn’t easy for him, growing up, it can’t be helped if he’s a little difficult or disobedient. I hope you don’t dislike him for having been raised in an entertainment house. Aie, he’s all I have left of my da-ge, I can’t stop feeling guilty for not having been there for him all those years.....”

Chu Wanning interrupted him: “Sect Leader is mistaken. I do not look down on him at all. If I minded his background, I wouldn’t have accepted him as a disciple.”

He spoke directly and certainly. Xue Zhengyong was relieved: “Good, good.”

Chu Wanning’s gaze fell back to the river currents coursing beneath the bridge, surging and crashing, and said no more. Unfortunately, the conversation between them, and Chu Wanning’s confession, were swallowed up by the billowing waters just like in the previous lifetime.

That he did not dislike or look down on Mo Ran, was never heard by a third person.

Three months of confinement passed by.

This day, Chu Wanning called his three disciples to the Red Lotus Pavilion, and said: "Since your spiritual cores have now stabilized, I've called all of you here today to take you to Dawning Peak, where you may attempt to summon your own weapons."

Both Xue Meng and Shi Mei's eyes widened, their faces ecstatic.

Dawning Peak was a sacred mountain located in the upper cultivation realm, thousands of feet tall, cliffs steep and fathomless.

According to legend, Dawning Peak was where Gouchen the Exalted once forged weapons. Gouchen the Exalted, the god of weaponry, oversaw the northernmost and southernmost ends of the heavens and controlled all the weapons of the world.

During the Heavenly Emperor's war to rid the realm of demons, Gouchen the Exalted forged the first true "sword" of the world using the mountains as the material, the seas as the smelting pool, and his own celestial blood as the forging flames. This sword pierced the heavens and the earth alike, and with one strike, split the land into pieces and caused the seas to flow in reverse.

"Sword" in hand, the Heavenly Emperor suppressed the demon race beneath the earth, henceforth unable to rise up, using only two strikes.

Those two strikes cut horizontally across the human realm, rendering a pair of deep gashes into the earth. After the war, the skies wept and ghosts howled through the nights, flooding and desolation plagued the realm as torrential rain poured down for a thousand years, filling the pair of gashes, which became the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers that nurtured countless lives.

And Dawning Peak, the birthplace of the holy sword, hence became a sacred place, with many cultivators making pilgrimages thereto. Even now, the spiritual energy left behind by the ancient gods remain strong there, and countless mysterious creatures roamed the mountains where all kinds of peculiar flora thrived. Dawning Peak was also the location where many cultivators reached enlightenment and ascended to the heavens.

But to most people, the biggest appeal of this incredible mountain where the holy sword was forged was its "Jincheng Lake".

The icy lake at the summit of the peak was frozen over year-round, glimmering as it reflected the light of the rising sun.

Legend had it that when Gouchen the Exalted cut open his palm and used his own blood to forge the holy sword, a drop fell into the dent at the summit. That drop of blood, yet to be exhausted even after a thousand years, became Jincheng Lake, its waters so clear one could see to its very bottom.

Regardless of whether the legend was true or not, Jincheng Lake's wonders were real. Although it was covered by three feet of ice all year round, some few cultivators were able to use the power of their own spiritual core to temporarily thaw the lake. At that time, an ancient mythical beast would leap ashore, holding a weapon in its mouth, and offer it to the person.

Xue Meng asked excitedly: "Shizun, what kind of mythical beast came up when you went to get your holy weapon?"

Chu Wanning answered: "Kunpeng^[10]."

Xue Meng's eyes sparkled: "Awesome! I can't wait to see a Kunpeng!"

Mo Ran jeered: "Don't count your Kunpings before you thaw that lake."

"What's that supposed to mean? You think I can't thaw Jincheng Lake or something?"

Mo Ran laughed: "Aiya, don't get your feathers so ruffled, I said no such thing."

Chu Wanning said: "It won't necessarily be a Kunpeng. It is said that hundreds of mythical beasts lived inside the lake, guarding the holy weapons. Whichever one takes a fancy to you will be the one to come offer you a weapon it had acquired. Additionally, each mythical beast has its own unique temperament. It will make a request of you; if you cannot complete its request, it will take the weapon and return to the lake."

Xue Meng pondered: "So that's how it is? Then, Shizun, what did the Kunpeng request from you?"

"It said it wanted to eat a meatbun," Chu Wanning replied.

The three disciples were silent for a moment, and then broke out into laughter. Xue Meng laughed: "You scared me, I almost thought it would be something challenging."

Chu Wanning also smiled a little and said: "I just got lucky. The requirements these mythical beasts have are bizarre; they could ask for anything. I once heard of someone who summoned a Xishu^[11]. That small rat asked him to give it his wife's hand in marriage. He refused, so the rat took the weapon back and left. In the end, that man never got another opportunity to acquire a holy weapon ever again."

Shi Mei murmured: "That's such a pity....."

Chu Wanning glanced at him and said: "What is there to pity? Honestly, I respect him for his noble character."

Shi Mei hurriedly corrected himself: "Shizun misunderstands, I didn't mean it that way. Of course, one's wife can't be replaced with even the most powerful weapons. I just think it's a pity that he missed out on such a godly weapon."

"It's just a rumor, anyway," Chu Wanning said. "Unfortunately, I didn't get to see a man like that for myself. Rather, many years ago at Jincheng Lake, what I saw were repulsive things that dirtied my eyes."

He paused, as if reminiscing about something, expression darkening as his brows furrowed.

"Nevermind, forget it. These thousand years, who knows how many instances of unwavering loyalty this lake had borne witness to, and how many instances of chilling heartlessness. Truly, how many people are even capable of resisting the allure of a holy weapon, of abandoning their chance at advancement, just to stay true to their heart.....? Heh."

Chu Wanning let out a cold chuckle, as if perturbed by something in his memories, before rearranging his features back into their customary impassiveness. But his brows were knitted just the slightest bit, as if in disgust, and he pressed his lips tightly together, speaking no more of the matter.

"Shizun, it's said that all of Jincheng Lake's holy weapons have a temper of their own. Was it easy for you to get the hang of yours when you first got it?" Xue Meng saw that he looked unhappy, and asked him to change the topic.

Chu Wanning raised an eyebrow and said tonelessly, "This teacher has three holy weapons, which one are you asking about?"

Author's Notes:

Today's mini theatre is centered around white cat teacher's last line, "This teacher has three holy weapons, which one are you asking about?" Expanded through various abridged versions!

If this is a school life novel —

Discipline inspector Xue Mengmeng, "Class president! I don't know how to correct this question qaq I remember you have a perfect score, lend me your test paper and let me have a look!"

Class president Chu Wanning raised his eyes, indifferently said, "I have three tests with perfect score, which one are you asking about?"

If this is a CEO novel.

Second generation rich Xue Mengmeng, "CEO Chu, my dad asked me to send this gift to your beach side vacation mansion, could you let me know your address?"

Dictatorial CEO Chu Wanning raised his eyes, indifferently said, "I have three beach side mansions, which one are you asking about?"

If this is a harem novel. (Hey hey hey!)

Young prince Xue Mengmeng: "Royal Imperial Uncle! Your concubine! She, she, she bullied me! She scratched me with her nails while you weren't around!"

Dissolute royal imperial uncle Chu Wanning raised his eyes, indifferently said, "Oh? This emperor I have three concubines, which one are you asking about?"

If this is live news: (...)

CCTV news reporter Xue Mengmeng, "Secretary Chu, under your leadership, H City's appearance, citizen happiness level all rapidly advanced. The city water pollutions decreased and the traffic congestion has visibly improved as well. At the award ceremony after G20, Mayor Mo especially gave his approvals and thanks towards your work, and awarded you with Knight's Medal of Honour. Could you show us your medal?"

Chu Wanning raised his eyes, indifferently said: "Comrade, I have three medals of honour, which one are you asking about?"

If this is...

Chu Wanning, "Shit!!! I quit!! Have you had enough? You didn't even give me today's lunch box!"

Meatbun, "... last one, this is the last one."

If this is gourmet food novel.

Foody Xue Mengmeng, "Owner! Owner! I heard your buns were featured in A taste of China! And in the 69th Jincheng Lake Cooking competition, judge Kumpeng praised it as "Meatbun that moved the big bird's conscience" Owner could you tell us what's in the filling? How much is it for one steamer basket? Can you give one a basket?"

Chu Wanning, "Human meat, thirty thousand, no."

Meatbun, "... Hey, you need to follow the script..."

Chu Wanning raised his eyes, indifferently said, "I have school life, CEO, harem, CCTV, four scripts, which one are you asking about?"

Meatbun, "....."

Only Chu Wanning could say something so earth-shatteringly astonishing like that in such a matter-of-factly calm manner. The three disciples each had their own thoughts on the matter.

Xue Meng's were the simplest, just a single exclamation: Ah!

Mo Ran's were a little more complicated as he stroked his chin with a hand and recalled some certain things from the previous lifetime, he thought that he definitely never wants to see Chu Wanning's third weapon in this lifetime.

As for Shi Mei, he tilted his head, a faint light flickering in that pair of hazy peach blossom eyes, as if in reverence or fascination.

"Did you get Tianwen from Jincheng Lake?"

Chu Wanning: "Mn."

"Then the other two....."

Chu Wanning: "One was also from here, but not the other. Weapon temperaments don't tend to be too fierce, so it should be manageable. There is no need to worry."

Xue Meng sighed with admiration: "Wish I could see Shizun's other holy weapons too."

Chu Wanning said: "Tianwen is more than enough for most purposes. As for the other two, it would be best if I never have to use them."

Xue Meng reluctantly made a noise of agreement, but a light still danced in his eyes. Chu Wanning noticed; he knew that Xue Meng was combative by nature, and that such things were not so easily suppressed, but luckily his heart was in the right place, so with some guidance there should be little reason for concern.

Mo Ran, standing to the side, was still stroking his chin, expression smiling yet not.

The purpose of a weapon was to take the life of another; a righteous man would only resort to such if there was truly no other option. Chu Wanning.....be it this life or the last, this righteousness of his was his downfall.

All that bullshit about justice always triumphing over evil was just words in books, but this idiot insisted on taking that stuff seriously. For all his exceptional talent and martial prowess, it served him right to end up as a mere prisoner beneath the steps, bones in the dirt.

"Shizun." Shi Mei's voice cut off his musing.

"This disciple heard that hundreds, if not thousands climb Dawning Peak every year in search of a weapon, but only one or two are able to thaw Jincheng Lake. On top of that, no one had managed to do so in the last few years. This disciple's cultivation is weak.....there really.....isn't any chance at all. A-Ran and the young master are both outstanding, but maybe I should just stay behind and practice my basics."

Chu Wanning: "....."

He did not speak, face like fine porcelain layered with a faint mist, as if deep in thought.

In the last life, Shi Mei also turned down the chance to go to Dawning Peak due to low self-confidence. Seeing this, Mo Ran immediately put on a grin: "There's no harm in trying. Even if it doesn't work out, just think of it as taking a

trip. Better than staying cooped up at Sisheng Peak all day, why not go out and see the world instead.”

Shi Mei only became even more nervous: “No but, I really am too weak, and there are so many people at Dawning Peak, if disciples from another sect challenged me to a fight, I’ll definitely lose and embarrass Shizun.....”

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes: “Is that what you were afraid of?”

The words were strange, as if questioning, yet also as if merely rhetorical. The other two didn’t sense anything off, but Shi Mei felt a creeping chill in his heart, and when he looked up, his eyes met Chu Wanning’s cold, biting gaze.

“Shizun.....”

Chu Wanning’s expression remained still as he spoke: “You specialize in healing; fights are not your forte to begin with. If someone bothers you about it, simply refuse, there is no shame in that.”

Mo Ran grinned: “Don’t worry Shi Mei, you have me.”

And so the three of them packed for the trip and set off.

The destination this time was quite far, all the way in the upper cultivation realm. Riding horses there would be too exhausting, and Chu Wanning still didn’t want to travel by sword, so they went by carriage at a relaxed pace for more than ten days before finally arriving at a city by the foot of Dawning Peak.

The three disciples had already climbed out of the carriage, but Chu Wanning still didn’t feel like moving just yet. He lifted up the carriage’s bamboo screen and said: “We’ll stay the night here. A little more travelling tomorrow and we’ll be at Dawning Peak.”

Their rest stop was called Dai City; not an overly large city, but affluent and bustling. The women wore silks and jades, and the men were dressed in expensive brocades. It was easily more opulent than even the richest locales of the lower cultivation realm.

Xue Meng clicked his tongue: “Look at these upper cultivation realm mutts, the scent of meat and wine wafting out of the doors of the rich while the poor starve and freeze to death in the streets.”

Mo Ran disliked it as well, and so didn’t quibble with Xue Meng for once. Instead, he made fun of the scene before him with a sweet smile on his face: “No kidding, I’m so jealous. No wonder so many people are so desperate to move to the upper cultivation realm. Even being a common person and not a cultivator here is still a much better life than down there.”

Chu Wanning took out and donned a silver mask before leisurely getting out of the carriage. He looked around at the hustle and bustle, thinking about something or another.

Xue Meng was puzzled: “Why is Shizun wearing a mask?”

Chu Wanning replied: “This is Linyi Rufeng Sect’s area. It’s best if I don’t show my face here.”

Seeing the lingering confusion in Xue Meng’s expression, Mo Ran sighed: “The lil phoenix must have left his head back home, to forget that Shizun used to be Linyi Rufeng Sect’s guest master.”

His words jolted Xue Meng’s memory, but the darling of the heavens wasn’t about to admit that he really did forget. So, face red, he rolled his eyes instead: “O-of course I knew that! But Shizun was only a guest master there, it’s not like

they bought him or anything, there's no reason he can't just up and leave. Even if the Rufeng Sect people do see him, what're they gonna do, drag him back?"

Mo Ran said: "You blockhead, have you seriously never heard? Ever since Shizun left Rufeng Sect, basically no one from the upper cultivation realm even knows where he went. Whenever we get asked who we're apprenticed under while out on exorcism missions, haven't we always just said Sisheng Peak without specifying our teacher?"

Xue Meng was taken aback for a moment before comprehension dawned on him: "Oh so Shizun's whereabouts is a secret here? But Shizun is so strong, why the need to hide?"

"It's not that I'm carefully hiding, I just don't want to be bothered." Chu Wanning said, "Let's go find an inn."

"Welcome, will the good sirs be staying with us?" The inn's attendant jogged over, greasy face gleaming.

Xue Meng said: "Four rooms."

The attendant forced a smile while twisting his hands: "So sorry sir, all the inns in the city have been pretty full recently, so I'm afraid we don't have four rooms to spare, would the good sirs be ok with two?"

There's nothing to be done about it, they'll just have to share.
But a small problem came up when it came to assigning rooms.

"I'm gonna room with Shi Mei." Mo Ran stated firmly where the three disciples were gathered while Chu Wanning paid the bill.

Xue Meng wasn't having it: "Like hell you are."

Mo Ran feigned shock: "Eh? I thought you liked sticking to Shizun?"

"Th-that doesn't mean I want to——"

He felt the utmost respect for Chu Wanning, but he was also afraid of him. Truth be told, even he couldn't say if he felt more adoration or fear toward the man.

Looking at Xue Meng's reddened face, Mo Ran grinned smugly: "Lil bro, why do I get the feeling that it's not that you don't want to sleep with Shizun, but that you're too scared to?"

Xue Meng's eyes were round as orbs: "It's not like Shizun's gonna eat me, why would I be scared!"

"Oh." Mo Ran's shit-eating grin only widened, "But Shizun hits people in his sleep, did you know that?"

Xue Meng: "....."

Xue Meng stammered, face going from pale to blue and back again, before he suddenly realized something and shot back in a rage: "How do you know what Shizun's like in his sleep! Have you slept with him before?"

That was a bit ambiguous, even though Xue Meng definitely didn't mean it that way. Mo Ran sneered to himself, not only had this venerable one slept with him before, this venerable one had *slept with* him before.

But real men don't flaunt past conquests, so he only continued grinning: "If you don't believe me, go ahead and see for yourself tonight. Oh yeah, don't forget to bring a bottle of salve, you're gonna need it."

Xue Meng was just about to rage when Chu Wanning finished paying and came over.

He glanced mildly at them and said: "Let's go."

The three youths followed Shizun upstairs like three little tails. Standing in front of the rooms, all three of them looked down meekly and waited for Chu Wanning to speak, despite the bickering just now.

Their bickering didn't actually carry any weight at all. When it came time to actually assign the rooms, they all shut up and waited for Chu Wanning to decide.

Chu Wanning paused before saying: "There are only two rooms, which of you....."

He hesitated, feeling a little self-conscious.

How to say——"which of you wants to be with me?"

It sounds a bit cautious and pitiful even to him, far too unbefitting of Yuheng Elder's style.

How should he say it then?

"Mo Weiyu, you're coming with me." Like that?

.....Forget it. Add a spiked club and a tiger pelt, and he'd be no different from some shady bandit stealing a family's young daughter. He was a respected cultivation master, he had to save his face.

Besides, ever since that one night at Red Lotus Pavilion, both of them felt awkward and avoided being alone together.

Chu Wanning's face remained impassive, but a thousand thoughts barreled through his mind. A good while passed before he, calm and collected, lifted his chin and nodded slightly toward Xue Meng.

"Xue Meng will room with me."

Xue Meng: "....."

Mo Ran's smile dropped off his face, dumbfounded.

He did indeed hope for Xue Meng to be with Chu Wanning so that he could be with Shi Mei. But to hear this choice come out of Chu Wanning's mouth somehow made him very irate.

He was utterly unaware of this, but he was just like a stray pup that didn't know how tall the sky was. The stray pup met a man. That person wasn't exactly the nicest to him, but would at least toss him some bone to gnaw on for each meal of the day.

But the stray pup disliked this mean guy. He chewed the bone, and, when done, would only lick his paw and bark endlessly at him. He didn't see this guy as his owner at all.

For some reason unknown to the pup, one day when this man came out with a bowl in hand, it no longer held the bone he was familiar with, but millet seeds instead. A beautiful bird with bright plumage flew down and perched on his shoulder, beady eyes staring at him as it rubbed its beak affectionately against his cheek.

The man turned to look to the side, patting the bird while patiently feeding it.

The stray pup was dumbfounded.

After all, he was so certain that Chu Wanning would choose himself.....

Author's Notes:

Dogs who are too spoiled will fall out of favor! Owner doesn't want you anymore! Owner now prefers to keep birds! (hey hey hey!) Owner would rather play with birds than you! Go cry!

Ch.35 This Venerable One Slips

That night, Mo Ran stared at the wall, cheek in hand.
On the other side of that wall was Chu Wanning and Xue Meng's room.

Shi Mei liked cleanliness, so he had left a change of clothes folded neatly on the bed and gone downstairs to ask the attendant to bring up hot water for bathing.

The walls of the inn weren't very soundproof. In the quiet, he could faintly hear the sounds from the adjacent room.

Chu Wanning seemed to have said something, he couldn't hear clearly. But he heard Xue Meng's voice loud and clear——

"Seems a little tight."

Mo Ran's ears stood up like a dog's, wiggling a little.

Across the wall, the little phoenix said: "Shizun, does it hurt?"

".....It's fine, you can keep going."

"I'll be gentle, let me know if it hurts."

"You talk too much. Do it or don't."

Mo Ran's eyes widened in alarm: "????"

Surely there was no way no how between those two, but what kind of exchange was *this*? What're they *doing*?

The pup's ears were practically pressed against the wall. There was the faint sound of clothes rustling, and if he strained, he could even hear Chu Wanning's stifled groans.

He had heard Chu Wanning make this kind of sound in bed countless times before. That Shizun of his didn't like to make any noise when it felt really good or really painful, always biting down hard on his lower lip as unshed tears gathered in his eyes. At that time, all he had to do was push just a little bit harder to rip soft pants of breaths from his throat.....

"W-wait." Chu Wanning's voice was low and rough, "Don't..... touch there."

"Alright." Xue Meng hesitated, then said in a small voice, "Then..... Shizun will do it himself?"

"Mn."

Where?

What nonsense is this? Don't touch where? Do what himself? Just *what* are they doing!

Mo Ran's entire face darkened.

By the time he realized what he was doing, he had already knocked on the neighboring door.

A flurry of rushing noises came from inside. Pup's expression grew even darker. He raised his voice: "Shizun, what are you——"

The door opened with a creak.

Xue Meng stood there, fully dressed, hand still holding a piece of blood-stained gauze. He narrowed his eyes as he glared at Mo Ran with puzzlement.

“What do you want, making such a ruckus this late at night? Trip over a ghost or something?”

Mo Ran’s mouth opened then closed stupidly. He glanced past Xue Meng to where Chu Wanning sat by the table with medicinal salve and fresh bandages on it.

“What were you guys.....”

Xue Meng continued glaring: “Applying medicine, of course. Shizun’s shoulder injury hasn’t healed yet. The dressing hasn’t been changed for a few days, and some of the wounds got infected again.”

Mo Ran: “.....”

He asked dumbly: “Th-then what was too tight.....”

“Too tight?” Xue Meng thought for a while, brows drawn together, “Oh, the bandages. They were wrapped too tightly before, some bits got stuck to the wounds with blood and almost wouldn’t come off.”

He stopped talking suddenly and glanced at Mo Ran with suspicion.

“You were eavesdropping?”

Mo Ran rolled his eyes and scrambled to save his sorry face: “Who’s eavesdropping! The walls here are so thin you can even hear breathing sounds if you lean against them, go see for yourself if you don’t believe me.”

“Oh. Really?” Xue Meng nodded, but then a moment later felt like something was off, “——Wait, how do you know that? Were you leaning against the wall to listen?”

Mo Ran: “.....”

Xue Meng, angrily: “Mo Weiyu, you are such a freak!”

Mo Ran, just as angry: “Who knows what beastly things you might do to Shizun!”

Xue Meng was a pure person who knew nothing of such matters. He had no idea what Mo Ran was even on about, so he only got angrier: “What nonsense are you yapping about!” And turned to complain, “Shizun, he——”

Chu Wanning put on his outer robe, holding it closed with one hand while straightening out his hair with the other as he calmly walked over and glanced Mo Ran up and down.

“Did you need something?”

“I.....I heard.....” Mo Ran fumbled for words, “Um, that stuff, so I thought Xue Meng was bullying you.....”

“What?” Chu Wanning didn’t understand at all, eyes narrowing, “Who’s bullying me?”

Mo Ran wanted to slap himself: “.....”

They were in the middle of staring awkwardly at one another when Shi Mei came upstairs.

“A-Ran? What are you doing outside Shizun’s room?”

"I.....uh....." Mo Ran stammered, "That, um, there was a misunderstanding."

Shi Mei smiled: "Well, has it been resolved?"

"Yeah, yeah." Mo Ran said hurriedly, "Shi Mei, didn't you go ask the attendant for hot water? Shizun probably hasn't bathed yet either, I'll go ask them to bring extra."

Shi Mei said: "No need." He took out four bamboo tablets, smiling, "The attendant said there's a natural hot spring by the inn which the innkeeper built into a bath. These tablets are passes, I got one for everyone."

Mo Ran thought that he, a cutsleeve^[12], probably shouldn't go soak in the hot spring with the other three.

Xue Meng was whatever; Shi Mei was pure and divine in his eyes, and he dared not even think any dirty thoughts about him. But Chu Wanning... he was well aware, from the couple times of close contact they had since his rebirth, that he'd probably lose his mind if he saw that person undress.

Mo Ran covered his face with a hand: "I'll pass."

Xue Meng, shocked: "You don't bathe before bed? Gross!"

Mo Ran said: "I'll ask the attendant to send some hot water up."

Shi Mei was baffled: "They don't boil hot water here, since all the guests go to the hot spring."

Mo Ran: "....."

Having no other choice, Mo Ran could only grab a change of clothes and go to the hot spring with everyone else. This inn was pretty diligent at currying favor; it knew well that most people who come to stay are cultivators headed to Jincheng Lake hopeful for a weapon, and so named the bath "Daybreak's Reflection in Jincheng" to invite some luck.

Mo Ran was scared stiff of losing his senses, and dared not even touch the other two. He changed in a rush, wrapping the towel tightly around his waist, and ran off by himself to the hot spring first to find a secluded spot.

It was already rather late, so there weren't many people in the bath, and the ones who were there were scattered distantly. With a square of white towel on the top of his head, Mo Ran sank into the water, leaving only half his face above, and let out a breath, 'gulugulu' blowing bubbles.

The first person to finish changing strode out with long, bare legs.

Mo Ran snuck a glance and let out a breath in relief. Thank the gods, it was only Xue Meng.

Xue-gongzi may be handsome, but he wasn't Taxian-Jun's type no matter how you cut it. Their gazes met, and Xue Meng pointed at him: "You, stay away from me."

"What gives?"

"You're dirty."

Mo Ran: "Hehe."

The bath was misty with water vapor. After a while, Xue Meng paused in the middle of scrubbing himself to call out: "Shizun, over here!"

Mo Ran, with half his face underwater, nearly choked. He knew damn well that he shouldn't look, but his gaze still couldn't help wandering over.

That single glance nearly killed him. He was so startled that he swallowed two whole mouthfuls of bath water and didn't even have time to be grossed out,

hurrying instead to sink even deeper into the water until only his eyes were above the water.

He totally didn't expect Chu Wanning and Shi Mei to come out together.

Shi Mei was slender and softly beautiful, with long, ink-black hair draped over his shoulders, and wrapped in a towel.

By all rights, Mo Ran should've wanted to sneak a look at him the most, but his glance darted quickly past him. He truly respect Shi Mei like the bright moon above, and dared not stare at him in public.

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, was tall and coldly handsome, with broad shoulders and a narrow waist, toned body and firm skin. He had his hair up in a high ponytail, and wore a large, white bathrobe that covered his whole body, except for the front where it was too wide to be pulled close and revealed a large expanse of smooth, firm chest.

Staring at him, Mo Ran felt like he was going to suffocate and boil in the water.

He wanted to look away.

But his traitorous eyes refused to listen, and his gaze fixed itself there without moving even the slightest bit. His ears slowly turned red.

Across the heavy mist, Chu Wanning seemed to have glanced at him, or perhaps not. He put a layer of waterproofing barrier over his bandages and stepped into the water. His legs could be seen between the floating robes, long and slender, balanced with tight contours.

Mo Ran: "....."

He really couldn't take any more, closing his eyes and sinking all the way into the water.

Even covered by the towel wrapped around his waist, his reaction was really too.....

Mo Ran felt extremely wronged.

He really didn't like Chu Wanning, he truly hated Chu Wanning.

But his body remembered their fervent love-making, those frenzied intertwinements that could turn even bones of steel into tenderness, and all of the absurd things between the two of them that made his face redden and his heart race.

The jut of his throat bobbed as a celestial war raged within.

Mo Ran was really about to cry.

It was the first time in his life that he loathed himself so——why was he *like* this? Shi Mei was right there, what the fuck was he doing losing his damn mind over Chu Wanning?

Even if they had pressed together skin to skin as they entwined in the previous life.

All that was in the past.

No matter how hung up he was over Chu Wanning's body, how could he do this to Shi Mei? This was too disrespectful to him, he deserved better.

Mo Ran lowered his head and focused on dispelling those wicked thoughts for quite a while before finally managing to suppress the fire in his abdomen. He burst out of the water and shook off the droplets, wiped his face with the towel, and opened his watery eyes.

And came face to face with Chu Wanning.

Even worse, the water he had just shaken off all splashed right onto Chu Wanning's face. He watched as a droplet leisurely made its way down into his

sharp black eyebrow, and then slowly slid lower, nearly about to get into that beautiful phoenix eye.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Mo Ran: “.....”

This was truly the worst. He couldn't see the surroundings earlier when he was submerged underwater holding his breath.

Chu Wanning also had no idea Mo Ran was under the water here, and was just minding his own business coming over here to fetch the box of fragrance bars. He didn't even get to the box before he got splashed with a faceful of water.

The hotspring was quite deep, the buoyancy of the water strong. Mo Ran, head swimming, tried to back away, but ended up slipping and falling right into Chu Wanning's arms instead.

“Ah!”

“.....”

Author's Notes:

Today's mini theater 《The world in your ear is different from mine》

Phoenix chick: Seems a little tight.

Little pup: !?!!?

Phoenix chick: Shizun, does it hurt?

Big white kitty:It's fine, you can keep going.

Phoenix chick: I'll be gentle, let me know if it hurts.

Big white kitty: You talk too much. Do it or don't.

Little pup: Arf arf arf!!! What are you doing!!! Angry!! Arf arf arf!!!

Phoenix chick: ...ah? I'm massaging shizun's shoulders.

Little pup: Then a little tight means...

Phoenix chick: Tight in the shoulder muscles, what did you think it was?

Little pup: ...

Many years later.

Handsome and mighty dumb husky (Does this kind of creature exist?):

Seems a little tight.

Phoenix chick: !?!!?

Dumb husky: Shizun, does it hurt?

Big white kitty:It's fine, you can keep going.

Dumb husky: I'll be gentle, let me know if it hurts.

Big white kitty: You talk too much. Do it or don't.

Phoenix chick pondered by the door for a moment, concluded the dumb husky must have been massaging shizun's shoulders.

Sigh, idiot husky has so much strength in his hands. The little phoenix rolled his eyes and thought—— it was just a shoulder massage, shizun's voice sounded a bit hoarse, one star review.

He shook his feathers and walked away, and he did not realize he missed an opportunity to become a heroic bird (shrugs)

Ch.36 This Venerable One Has Probably Lost His Mind

>>mature content(?)

Without thinking, Chu Wanning reached out to steady him. As the two of them stood plastered against each other in the warm spring water, Mo Ran felt a spark go through his entire body, goosebumps crawling up his skin.

Even though he'd already held a near-naked Chu Wanning at the Red Lotus Pavilion back then, the circumstances at the time had been dire. There wasn't any time to dwell on the situation, so he hadn't thought much of it.

But right now, with one hand against Chu Wanning's chest and the other unconsciously supporting his Shizun's waist, their legs tangled together under the water, with the spring making their skin feel warmer and more slippery, Mo Ran's head short-circuited entirely.

He, to Chu Wanning.....

Without even doing anything but touching the other's waist.....

His body reacted with the intensity of a rushing river.

"Sh-shizun, I——"

As he frantically tried to get up and away, his red-hot lower parts made contact with the other person in the struggle.

Chu Wanning's eyes suddenly widened, his beautiful face stricken with horror, and he backed away immediately. At the same time, the droplet of water that had been clinging to his eyelashes dripped down into his eye. He grew more and more agitated, squeezing his eyes shut and rubbing at them, but he didn't have a bath towel to wipe the water with.

"Shizun, use, use mine."

Mo Ran's face burned red, mortified to absolute death. Still trying his best to pretend that nothing was wrong, he used his own towel to wipe the water droplets off of Chu Wanning's face for him.

When Chu Wanning finally opened his phoenix eyes again, he still had a baffled look of distress on his face, with a hint of panic underneath. But it only lasted a moment before he quickly forced himself to calm down. He pretended he hadn't felt anything at all and said, hoarsely: "The fragrance bar, pass it to me."

"Oh.....oh okay."

Mo Ran crabwalked stiffly to the edge of the pool and picked up the box of fragrance bars sitting on the bank.

"What scent does, does Shizun want?"

"Whatever."

Mo Ran's head swam in a daze. After staring blankly into the box for a long time, he turned back and said sincerely, "There's no scent here called 'Whatever.'"

"....."

Chu Wanning sighed heavily. "Plum blossom, haitang."

"Okay."

Mo Ran took two fragrance bars and handed them to Chu Wanning. As soon as their fingertips touched, there was another burst of tremors.

No matter how badly he wanted to, it was impossible to shake off all those memories from the past.

If this was in the past, he'd already be fervently tangled with him at the side of the pool by now. A vision appeared unbidden before his eyes, of Chu Wanning half-kneeling on the ground as he endured his fiery, ferocious passions, eyes half-lidded and body trembling uncontrollably as he took it, but still got screwed until climax washed over him.....

Mo Ran was unable to stand it anymore; those carnal desires made his eyes see red. He didn't dare to look at Chu Wanning at all. He felt that even looking at Shi Mei right now would be safer than looking at Chu Wanning.

How.....could this be.....

How could this happen?

He quickly finished washing himself and, taking advantage of the fact that the other three were still soaking in the pool, Mo Ran said some vague words to the effect of him being sleepy and that he'd turn in first.

Once he got back to his room, he bolted and locked the door.

Mo Ran couldn't take it anymore, and moved to relieve himself. He didn't want to think about Chu Wanning's appearance at a time like this. He'd even rather soil Shi Mei's pure image; at least that would be easier for his confused heart to accept.

But neither his body nor his mind wanted to listen, and every sight that flashed before his eyes was that of him and Chu Wanning in the past, neck to neck as they sought pleasure in one another. It was like the floodgates had opened tonight, all those torrid memories came rushing back into his mind in a frenzy, along with wave after wave of trembles.

He treated himself almost roughly, as though he was on top of that man's body, and on the very edge of ruin, he threw his head back as if he refused to accept it, yet his breaths came out in muddled gasps and pants.

He breathed out the name without realizing it.

"Wanning....."

Calling this name, he let out a stifled grunt, trembling slightly as he came without holding anything back, covering his palm in sticky wetness.....

Once he finished, Mo Ran leaned over to rest his forehead against the cold wall. His eyes were awash with confusion.

Shame, guilt, loathing, arousal.

He never expected he'd still have such strong reactions to Chu Wanning even after being reborn.

He was suddenly filled with disgust toward himself.

Since he never attained Shi Mei in his past life, he vented all his passion into other frivolous relationships. But even though he made it seem like passionate love, it didn't really mean anything to him.

After the candlelight was extinguished, it was all just sex, all the same no matter who it was with.

Even the way his heart moved towards Rong Jiu was just because he bore some resemblance to Shi Mei.

But the kinds of feelings he had toward Chu Wanning were completely different. He realized, as he thought about it harder, that even though they weren't doing anything sexual, the intense pleasure he got from it was unlike anything he was ever able to feel with those prostitutes. It wasn't just physical, and.....

He refused to dwell on it.

He was in love with Shi Mei, always had been, and always will be too. His feelings absolutely wouldn't change.

After repeating this to himself a few times, Mo Ran calmly slowed his breathing, frowned, and then squeezed his eyes shut.

He felt anxious, annoyed, and aggrieved all at once.

He didn't want this.

In matters of lust, he couldn't help but think about Chu Wanning. When the lust subsided, he didn't want to think of anything to do with Chu Wanning, whether it was a hair on his head or a fleeting look.

He frantically thought to himself, almost to the point of paranoia, that the one he likes, the one he loves deeply.....

.....is Shi Mei.....

Chu Wanning's mind was in the same state of distress.

Totally unexpectedly, he had seen and, moreover, felt Mo Ran's desire. The young man's body was already quite mature, already much too overwhelming, hard and so hot as to be scalding when excited, like hot iron waiting to be forged.

Even though Chu Wanning quickly schooled his face into a blank calm, and refused to bring anything up afterwards, the encounter had made his head go numb and filled him with disbelief.

To make matters worse, his own body had reacted too.

Fortunately, he had a thin face and so always wore a bathrobe even in hot springs. It covered his whole body and no one saw anything, otherwise he would really never be able to show his face again.

But why would Mo Ran.....

As he lay in bed that night, he ruminated quietly for hours. He dared not even imagine—that, maybe, Mo Ran also liked him.

That kind of thought was entirely too delusional and shameful.

Even the cautious thought of "maybe Mo Ran also likes—"

The word "me" didn't even have time to surface in his mind before Chu Wanning furiously pinched himself. That pair of clear, bright phoenix eyes flickered as if trying to hide.

He didn't even dare to entertain the whole thought.

Besides, his personality was harsh, he was quick to hit people, his words were poisonous and he had a bad temper, he was nowhere near as beautiful as Shi Mei in appearance, and not to mention he was not young anymore. Even if Mo Ran liked men, he wouldn't be blind enough to like him.

On the outside, he was aloof and haughty.

But on the inside, the truth was that he'd been treated coldly by others for so long, been feared for so long, that as he walked this long and lonely road, his opinion of himself had slowly crumbled into dust.

They woke up the next day.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning met in the hallway of the inn, both holding secrets in their hearts. Both of them looked at each other, but neither deigned to speak first.

In the end, it was Mo Ran who first carried on as if all was normal. He smiled toward Chu Wanning and said: "Shizun."

Chu Wanning was relieved; he really didn't know how to deal with this situation. Seeing as Mo Ran chose not to mention anything that happened yesterday, he was perfectly willing to go along with it. He nodded once, lightly.

"Since we're already up, we should go wake up Shi Mei as well. After packing up real quick, we can depart for Dawning Peak."

Dawning Peak was covered in snow all year round, and exceedingly cold. Even for a cultivator, it would be difficult to endure such cold weather. Chu Wanning went to the tailor to buy winter cloaks and gloves for the disciples, so that they could wear them when the temperature dropped.

The shopkeeper smoked her pipe and smiled, lips drawn up in a bright red and welcoming customers. When she saw Mo Ran she said, "What a handsome young fellow! Look at this black cape with a golden dragon on it; the embroidery is of the highest quality. You see the light in its eyes? It took me more than three months to complete it!"

Mo Ran gave an embarrassed laugh. "Miss's words are very sweet, but I'm just going into the mountains to seek a weapon. There's no need for me to wear something so formal and ornate."

Seeing that this prospect failed, the shopkeeper instead turned to Shi Mei. "Oh, this young prince is beautiful beyond compare, even more lovely than the most beautiful girl in this city! Sir, if you would allow me, this red butterfly and peony cloak would suit you perfectly. How about you give it a try?"

Shi Mei forced a smile. "Miss, aren't those women's clothes?"

Xue Meng hated shopping for clothes, so he refused to come along and just waited in place. Chu Wanning chose a black cloak with purple lining for him, with white rabbits embroidered around the brim.

The shopkeeper said, "Sir, this cloak is a bit small for you. It would be better suited for a teenager."

"It's for my disciple," Chu Wanning said expressionlessly.

"Oh, ooh!" The shopkeeper realized her mistake and quickly smiled. "What a great teacher."

It may have been the first time Chu Wanning had ever been called a "great teacher." He went still, and his face betrayed nothing, but his steps were out of sync when he walked away, with arm and leg on the same side moving together for quite a few steps.

In the end, Mo Ran chose a light gray cloak, Shi Mei a moonlit-white one, and Chu Wanning a plain white one with dark purple lining. After they made their purchases, they went back to Xue Meng.

When Xue Meng saw his cloak, his eyes widened.

"What is it?" Chu Wanning said, not understanding his reaction.

"It, it's nothing."

When Chu Wanning walked far enough away that Xue Meng thought he couldn't hear, he looked at the lining on the cloak and muttered, "Purple? I don't like purple."

He didn't expect to hear Chu Wanning's voice saying coldly, "So much nonsense. If you won't wear it you can climb up naked."

"....."

They leisurely traveled to the end of the road, and the four of them reached the foot of Dawning Peak before nightfall.

Dawning Peak was rich in spiritual power, and home to many beasts and monsters. Even cultivators would not dare to rush in carelessly unless they were significantly strong.

Since Chu Wanning was there, though, they didn't have to worry about things like that. Chu Wanning conjured three haitang petals from thin air, giving them spirit-repelling properties and tucking them into the waist sashes of his three disciples. "Let's go," he said.

Mo Ran looked out at the peaks hidden in the night sky, like a huge, ancient beast crouching deathly still, and a myriad of emotions poured into his heart.

In the past, it was on Dawning Peak where he declared to the sun and moon, ghosts and demons, that he, Mo Ran, was not satisfied with the current cultivation world, and would instate himself as the new ruler.

It was the same year in which, at Dawning Peak, he had taken a wife and a concubine.

He still remembered the face of that wife, Song Qiutong, a real unparalleled beauty. From certain angles, she looked very much like Shi Mei.

He was not a person who cared much for etiquette or honor, and didn't even bother with those tedious rites of marriage. At that time, he just took Song Qiutong's delicate hand, pulled the red-veiled woman up a flight of thousands of stairs, and they walked for over an hour.

Eventually, Song Qiutong's feet hurt too much to walk.

Mo Ran had a bad temper, he lifted her veil and was about to yell at her.

But, under the light of the moon, Song Qiutong's sorrowful eyes made her look just like that person who had long since passed.

The angry words died in his mouth and, after drawing a shaky breath, he finally said:

"Shi Mei, I'll carry you."

In terms of seniority, if Song Qiutong had been his peer, she would indeed have been his shi-mei^[13]. So she only paused slightly at this kind of address, reasoning that since Mo Ran had wiped out the entire Rufeng Sect, it was naturally now part of Sisheng Peak. That being the case, it wasn't like it was wrong for him to call her shi-mei, so she just smiled and said, "Okay."

And so, for the last several thousand steps, Taxian-Jun, Master of the Mortal Realm, Ruler of the Shadows, steadily, one foot in front of the other, carried his red-adorned bride to the peak.

He lowered his head and watched their oddly shaped shadows moving on the ground, overlapping with each other.

He laughed a little, and said through a dry throat, "Shi Mei, I'm the Master of the Mortal Realm now. From this day on, no one will be able to hurt you."

The woman on his back didn't know what to say to this, hesitated a little, and finally just said "Mm."

The voice was soft. Perhaps because it was too soft, it was hard to distinguish it as a feminine voice, and the tone was vague.

Not a soul could see Mo Ran's face as his eyes grew red. He murmured, "I'm sorry, I've kept you waiting for this day too long."

Song Qiutong thought that Mo Ran was saying he'd had feelings for her for a long time, so she replied softly, "Husband....."

This woman's voice was clear and crisp, like morning dew, pleasing to hear. But Mo Ran's feet suddenly slammed to a halt.

“What’s wrong?”

“.....Nothing.”

As he started to walk again, Mo Ran’s voice grew firm again and lost its hoarseness.

After a pause, he said, “In the future, it’s better if you call me A-Ran.”

Song Qiutong was caught off guard, and didn’t quite dare to call Taxian-Jun this. “Husband, this..... I’m afraid.....”

Mo Ran’s voice grew harsh and violent. “If you don’t listen, I’ll throw you off of this mountain!”

“A, A-Ran!” Song Qiutong quickly changed her speech. “A-Ran, I was wrong.”

Mo Ran said nothing else.

He lowered his head again, silently walking forward.

The shadows on the ground were still just shadows.

Looking back at it, it was easy to see that it, really, was just a shadow.

The rose-tinted things he’d wanted to see were all fake.

In the end, what he had was nothing more than an illusion.
It was all in vain.

“Shi Mei.”

“Mn?” The person walking beside Mo Ran turned his head and asked. The sounds of shifting leaves, rustling grass, and the light of the moon all reflected onto this person’s face. “A-Ran, what is it?”

“Are you.....tired from walking?” Mo Ran glanced at Chu Wanning and Xue Meng who were walking in front of them and whispered, “If you’re tired, how about I give you a piggy-back ride?”

Before Shi Mei could reply, Chu Wanning turned his head to look back at them.

He glared coldly at Mo Ran and said, “Are Shi Mingjing’s legs broken? Does he need you to carry him?”

“Shizun,” Shi Mei said hurriedly, “A-Ran was just joking, don’t be angry.”

Chu Wanning frowned, eyebrows drawing together into a severe expression. “Ridiculous. What do I have to angry about.”

As soon as he finished speaking, he whirled back around with a flick of his sleeve.

Mo Ran: “.....”

Shi Mei: “.....”

“Shizun seems mad.....”

“You know how he is,” Mo Ran whispered into Shi Mei’s ear. “His own heart is smaller than a needle tip, cold-blooded and heartless. Can’t even stand to see other people doing good things for their peers.”

He wrinkled his nose and lowered his voice even further, concluding, “Seriously the worst.”

Suddenly, Chu Wanning's voice rang out from in front of them. "Mo Weiyu, if you say one more word, you'll find yourself thrown down the mountain!"

Mo Ran silenced himself as if in obedience, but secretly grinned over at Shi Mei and mouthed, 'See, what'd I say?'

Author's notes:

Today a teacher from cultivation school assigned homework for the students, use "Impossible" in a sentence.

Mo Ran: To like someone, is it just liking his body? Impossible.

Chu Wanning: To like someone, is it something that must be said out loud? Impossible.

Shi Mei: My appearance, is it like a girl's? Impossible.

Xue Meng: As a straight man, would I be willing to wear lavender^[14] coloured cloak? Impossible.

Mrs Wang: As a straight man, would you not wear it and climb up the mountain naked with three gay men? Impossible.

Xue Zhengyong: Yuheng Elder is this ghey, would there be any straight men under his wing? Impossible.

Song Qiutong: As a canon fodder, would the emperor marry me in this lifetime? Impossible.

Meatbun: Dumb husky was a scum today, would there be no little angels scolding him in the comments? Impossible.

Ch.37 This Venerable One Meets a God

"The cold moon reflects upon the frosty snow; the frozen mountain embraces the icy lake. The tallest of the tall cannot be crossed, and the despair of the world is in this timely moment."

Xue Meng wiped snow off of the large boulder, wearing deer skin gloves on his hands, as he read aloud the cinnabar inscription upon it. He looked back and said, "Shizun, we're here."

Dawning Peak was embellished by storming snow all year long. At that moment, a luscious crescent moon was high in the sky, a shimmering glow looking upon the icy lake. Cold air pierced through thick forest leaves in an absolute world of ice. Jincheng Lake was frozen without traces of snow, as if there were jewels made of glass across the sky and earth, the Milky Way itself fallen upon mere mortals, falling stars seen as far as ten thousand miles, a scene peerless in magnificence. It was as if one had truly journeyed to the end of humanity, to a world covered in beautifully untainted snow.

The group went to the lake, the surface smooth like a mirror and filled with a magnificent, glimmering light. A stone embankment went through all the way to the center of the lake. There was a stone tablet next to the embankment covered in frost. Intersecting patterns spread across the stone, and on it was written only "The Path Forward is Difficult" in powerful calligraphy. After thousands of years, the words were still clear, and it seemed like people often repainted it over.

Chu Wanning stopped in front of the stone embankment and said, "Only one person can go into Jincheng Lake at a time to seek a weapon. Which of you will go first?"

Xue Meng could hardly contain himself before blurting out, "Shizun, I'll go first!"

Chu Wanning looked at him, thought about it for a moment, and shook his head. "You're too rash, I'd be ill at ease."

After that, Shi Mei laughed a little at his side and said, "Shizun, how about I go in first, since I probably can't break through the icy lake anyway."

Shi Mei went along the stone embankment on top of the icy lake that only let one person through at a time. He slowly walked to the end.

In accordance with the customs, he produced a ball of spiritual energy in his hand, and then leaned over to place his palm against the ice—Shi Mei's spiritual energy traveled ceaselessly down along the surface of the ice, and they could see a white light flickering from the distance.

Mo Ran stood from afar and held his breath, clenching his hand into a fist.

But no matter how long Shi Mei tried at the lake, the ice did not budge at all. He gave a forced smile as he gave up and walked back, saying to Chu Wanning, "Shizun, my apologies."

"No matter, try again after cultivating a few more years."

Mo Ran sighed a little, somehow more disappointed than either of them, but still went to comfort Shi Mei and said, "It's fine, you'll get more chances. Next time I'll come with you to try again."

Chu Wanning said, "Don't yap so much. Step up, it's your turn now."

In his past life, when Mo Ran went to seek a weapon, it was during his most carefree days of youth. He had nothing but boundless enthusiasm toward the prospect of a holy weapon. In this life, it was nothing more than coming to pick up a weapon; he already knew what kind of things would be waiting ahead of him. There was none of that anxiousness or expectation. On the other hand, he did feel a kind of warmth, as if he was about to reunite with an old friend.

He walked along the stone embankment, and knelt before the icy lake. Bending down, he pressed his palm against the surface of the ice.
Mo Ran closed his eyes.

His scabbardless long blade.....

That sinful, vicious blade which saw with him all the world's flowers, and tasted all the blood in the human realm——

Mo Ran opened his eyes, and whispered to the surface of the lake, "Bu'gui, I'm here."

As if sensing the call of its destined master, a huge black shadow suddenly appeared under the surface of Jincheng Lake's ice. The shadows gathered under the ice, becoming more and more clear, more and more vivid.

Suddenly, the thousands of feet of ice loudly shattered, and Mo Ran could hear Xue Meng's distant shout of alarm come from the shore.

"The ice is gone!!"

The lake's water surged up, waves crashing. A huge, turquoise-black dragon broke through the surface, each scale on its body seven feet wide. In an instant, Jincheng Lake's surface flooded over, a heavy fog rolling over it. The dragon shimmered brilliantly under the moonlight and spouted a breath from its nose.

At the same time, an ancient barrier fell around the edge of the lake, separating Mo Ran from Chu Wanning and the others.

Inside of the barrier, human and dragon regarded each other.

Mo Ran squinted his eyes through silver mist and looked up at the dragon.

He could see that the dragon held a scabbardless blade in its jaws. Though ancient, the blade was still thick and sharp, capable of carving iron and smashing gold. The dragon transformed the blade into a size usable to a human, and slowly lowered its radiant, vibrantly colored serpentine body to the ground, placing the blade in front of Mo Ran.

It didn't lift its head immediately, instead turning its eyes, golden and as large as a grown man's body height, to stare at the other.

The dragon's eyes were like two great, bronze mirrors, Mo Ran's reflection shining clearly within them. Mo Ran stood still with bated breath, and waited for it to speak.

If nothing was different, then all he needed to do was retrieve a plum blossom from the foot of the mountain and bring it back. He ended up being let off easy because the old dragon sought only peace and elegance.

Little did he know, he'd find after waiting a long while that this was not the same dragon as the one in his past life who gave the weapon to him so easily. Its beard fluttered as it narrowed its two enormous golden eyes, then lifted its front claw to write two words in the snow before Mo Ran:

Mortal one?

Mo Ran stared.

He clearly remembered that the dragon in his past life could speak. How come it's mute in this life?

After the mute dragon wrote these two words, he immediately wiped the writing away with a scaly claw to write another sentence:

No, a mortal would not have such strong spiritual energy. Then, are you a god?

Mo Ran: "....."

The dragon thought for a moment, then swiped its hand once more and wrote:

Not a god; you have evil energy in your body. Are you a kind of demon?

Mo Ran yelled in his head, what kind of nonsense was this?! This Venerable One was just reborn, there's nothing to deliberate back and forth about. Just give this Venerable One his blade already!

The old dragon seemed like it could sense his impatience for his weapon, and suddenly lifted its scaly claws and pressed the blade underneath its foot. With one foot on the blade, it used its other to wipe its writing and continue on another patch of snow:

No need to take offense. I saw two other shadows in your body. I have never seen anything like it in my life. So tell me, are you a mortal or ghost? God or demon?

Mo Ran raised an eyebrow and replied, "Of course I'm a human. Is this something that even needs to be said?" He was just a human who had already died once.

The old dragon paused for a moment, then wrote: *One human soul, split like this. This really is never seen before, unheard of.*

The dragon shook its head back and forth in a puzzled manner, and Mo Ran couldn't help but find it funny. "What's so strange about that? Anyway, Elder, what'll take it for you to give me this blade of yours?"

The old dragon sized him up for a while and wrote:

Then, you stand there and don't move. Let me use a technique to peer into your soul, and I'll give the blade to you. How is that?

“.....”

He didn't expect to be given such a request. Under that profound stare, he started to feel a little bit of hesitation.

He then thought, what if this old thing could see into his past life? What would happen then?

But Bu'gui was almost within his grasp. This blade possessed a strong, fierce power; it was one of the rarest holy weapons in existence. If he refused now, he'd never have a chance to get his hands on it again.

With little pause, Mo Ran looked up and said, “That's fine and all but, Elder, will you give me the blade no matter what you see inside of me?”

The old dragon drew on the ground:

These are the terms; I will naturally follow through on my words.

“No matter whether I was good or evil in the past?”

The old dragon paused for a moment, and then wrote:

Even if you were evil in the past, I will not stop you. I can only hope that you will pursue goodness in the future.

Mo Ran smiled into his hand and said, “Alright, since the Elder says so, I don't have any objections. Please examine all you like then, Elder.”

The old dragon lifted itself slightly. Its radiant, serpentine body bowed and it blew a breath from its nose, and then both of its eyes started to emit bright red haze.

But this time, Mo Ran was astounded to find that, reflected in the dragon's eyes, there were two other hazy and indistinct shadows in addition to himself. One to his left, one to his right, standing faintly behind him.

Mo Ran immediately whipped around in shock, but behind him there was only emptiness and unceasingly falling snow. Where did the other figures come from?

As he turned back again, he saw the figures in the dragon's eyes become more and more clear, as if something sunken in water was slowly floating up to the surface.

Mo Ran kept staring, and suddenly realized that the two silhouettes were extremely familiar—he couldn't stop himself from taking a step forward, and immediately the closed-eyed figures before him snapped open their eyes!

Shi Mei!

Chu Wanning?!

He never expected that that it would be them. Mo Ran stumbled from being startled by such a thing, staggering backwards and stuttering so much he couldn't form whole sentences. “How——This is——”

The three people in the old dragon's eyes stood quietly, expressions calm and without a hint of emotion, staring like this into the distance.

Mo Ran was stunned. After a while, the blood red fog rose again and the figures in the dragon's eyes started to blur until they finally disappeared altogether.

The old dragon blew a huff from its nose, shook out its body, and then wrote quickly:

I can not make sense of it. I have seen much in my lifetime, but I have never seen a person's soul with the imprints of two other people upon it. Certainly, utterly perplexing.

"My, my soul.....has their imprints in it?"

Yes.

After writing that one word, the old dragon paused. Then, it resumed:

I do not know what happened to you. How deep must an obsession run, for another person to be entangled so tightly in one's own soul?

Mo Ran stared at the messy lines in the snow, and his face started growing red as if he were being suffocated.

His obsession with Shi Mei ran so deep through his bones, that even if he was imprinted upon his soul, and even if the dragon could also see Shi Mei when he looked at him, he wouldn't think much of it.

But.....what the hell was up with Chu Wanning?

What kind of heartfelt obsession did he have towards Chu Wanning?
Was extreme hatred also obsession enough to count as entanglement?

This human and dragon were so immersed in contemplation, that they did not notice when the surface of Jincheng Lake started to ripple unnaturally.

When the water rushed up and the waves broke through, it was too late.

All they saw was the water in Jincheng Lake split apart, as if sliced in half by a sword, the water on both sides rushing up toward the sky. Two tightly packed groups of beasts rushed out from between the waves. They had the bodies of leopards and the heads of oxen. Though they were not as large as the old dragon, the horns on their head shone coldly, and all of their claws were sharp and menacing. Although hundreds were gathered, the old dragon did not show any fear. He looked askance at them with his golden eyes.

"What happened?" Mo Ran said.

The old dragon paused, and then wrote: *the Exalted Gouchen*.

When he read those four words, Mo Ran immediately felt as if he'd been struck by lightning. Gouchen the Exalted is the god of weapons, lording over all the weapons in the world. This founding god created the first sword in the world, helping Fuxi^[15] lay waste to his demonic enemies.

That awe-inspiring primal god was actually these hundreds of cows?

The thought was too horrifying for Mo Ran to accept. As he stared blankly, uncomprehending, he suddenly heard the sounds of an ocarina coming from a far distance.

The ocarina was an ancient instrument. Not many people in their age still knew how to play it. As the sounds of the ocarina came closer, the raucous group of beasts slowly stilled and bent their forelegs, one by one, until they kneeled along both sides. A man wearing splendid robes and carrying a long sword rode atop a qilin^[16] through the path made by the beasts.

The man had a handsome face, with delicate and wholly benign features. He stood in the wind as snow fell onto him and his robes gently billowed. The clay ocarina in his hands was smooth and deep in color. His fingers were placed lightly over the holes as he held it to his lips to play.

When the music finished playing on a soft note, the hundreds of ox beasts suddenly dissolved into water, revealing that they had only been transfigured creations. The man put down the clay ocarina, ran his eyes over Mo Ran for a moment, and then gently smiled: "Truly a strange person, the likes of which one

may never encounter in millenia. No wonder you piqued Wangyue's interest. I am Gouchen the Exalted, who lives within Jincheng Lake. All of the weapons in this lake were forged by myself. Just things of little consequence; please excuse my humble work."

Even though the old dragon wrote it, and this man said it himself as well, Mo Ran still couldn't believe it. His face paled as he said, "You're Gouchen the Exalted?"

The man smiled patiently and replied, "Yes, I am he."

Mo Ran was on the verge of choking. ".....God of a Thousand Weapons? That guy?"

"Correct." Gouchen the Exalted raised his eyebrows delicately, laughter in his eyes. "The later generations do seem to call me that, how embarrassing. I just grind a few paltry swords and tie a few little whips when I'm bored, yet people idolize me so."

Mo Ran: "....."

Strong people acting humble was the most grating thing on earth. Chu Wanning matter-of-factly said "I have three holy weapons," but this Exalted Gouchen was even more irritating. He actually went around calling the weapons he created "paltry swords" and "little whips"; why doesn't he call Emperor Fuxi "lil' old man" while he's at it?

Mo Ran took a while to process this and finally said, "Then, then that, then shouldn't you be in the heavenly realm? How could you be in this.....this lake....."

"I like to fight and spar, so I often ended up disturbing the Emperor's peace and quiet. After being on the receiving end of his stink eye, I figured I might as well just descend."

.....

"Then how long have you been here?" Mo Ran said, dumbfounded.

Gouchen looked thoughtful. He then smiled and said, "Not too long, only a few hundred years."

".....A few hundred years," Mo Ran repeated, and then laughed drily. "Doesn't the Exalted God think that's a bit long?"

Gouchen's expression was placid as he smiled, nonchalantly waving his sleeves.

"It's not too long. Besides, forging a sword for the Heavenly Emperor used up much of my spiritual power. And staying in such an abundantly opulent heavenly realm gets rather boring; it's much better here."

Although Mo Ran was extremely curious to know more about this god of weapons from legend, it wasn't really his place to keep prodding about personal matters. He thought about it and decided there were more important matters at hand, so he said instead, "Exalted Elder, you didn't just come out to see me today because you thought my soul was special, right?"

"Why not? Your spiritual power is rare, hard to ever come across," Gouchen smiled. "I worry that if I give you this blade, it would be wasted potential."

"Haha, it's not too bad," Mo Ran replied. "This blade seems like it would suit me."

"I thought that at first as well," Gouchen continued pleasantly. "But upon closer examination, I found that it isn't the case. You have a rare talent, so it made me curious. I came out today because I wanted to invite you to the bottom of the lake to chat. I would like to see which among those millions of blades would be best suited for you."

"....."

This was no small matter in and of itself. Even though Taxian-jun had experienced a whole array of things in his life, he still choked a bit.

The God of a Thousand Weapons actually invited him to.....pick a weapon?

Gouchen the Exalted took his silence to mean he was reluctant to go out of fear. "There's no need for you to worry, even though there are many monsters under the water, they all answer to me. I guarantee they will not harm you. Wangyue can testify to it."

The old dragon said nothing, and slowly bowed at the side.

When Mo Ran saw that he was really being given a genuine invitation, he couldn't help but feel a jolt in his heart. He then said, "Then, if I go, can the Exalted God grant me a request?"

"What kind of request?"

"The person who sought a weapon before me is a close friend of mine." As Mo Ran spoke, he pointed to the shores beyond the barrier, and brought his attention to Shi Mei. "He was denied just now, so I'm thinking, if I grant the Exalted God's wish, then can the Exalted God grant my wish as well and give him a weapon?"

"What am I? Something like that is effortless for me." Gouchen laughed. He suddenly flicked his hand, and the ancient barrier covering the sky immediately disappeared.

"This is a very simple matter. Let all three of them come over, then. If any weapon catches their eyes, it is as good as theirs."

Mo Ran was delighted by the unexpected turn of events. He never thought that he'd come across a way to solve the issue he wrestling with so effortlessly. He was more excited at the possibility of Shi Mei receiving a holy weapon than the prospect of his own upgrade. He immediately agreed to the Exalted Gouchen's invitation, and brought Shi Mei and the others over. As he relayed what was going on to the other three, Shi Mei and Xue Meng's eyes grew larger and larger, and even Chu Wanning reacted slightly.

Gouchen the Exalted watched from the side and abruptly said, "Hm?" as if he suddenly realized something. He stared at Chu Wanning.

"It's you?"

Ch.38 This Venerable One Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea

Chu Wanning's indifference extended to even gods and immortals. He said, mildly: "Does the Exalted God recognize me?"

"How could I not." Gouchen smiled in a refined manner, "Many years ago, when you came to Jincheng Lake in search of a weapon, the depth and purity of your spiritual strength was such that I almost couldn't resist coming out to see you. So how is it, is the weapon to your liking?"

"Which weapon is the Exalted God referring to?"

".....Ah." Gouchen startled slightly, then said with a smile, "How absentminded of me, to forget that I gave you two."

Chu Wanning said: "No matter. Tianwen works very well."

"Tianwen?"

"The willow vine."

"Oh. I see." Gouchen smiled, "So you named it Tianwen? And what about the other one? What's that one called?"

Chu Wanning answered: "Jiu'ge."

"And how is Jiu'ge?"

"It has a chilling nature, I rarely use it."

Gouchen sighed: "What a shame."

Chat over, Gouchen turned around and said languidly: "Wangyue, I'll be taking them down below. It's not good for your body to be up here above the water where the spiritual energy is so thin, so head back soon yourself."

The old dragon nodded, raising a large wave as it dived back into the lake, scales glittering.

Meanwhile, Chu Wanning busied himself casting water-repelling charms on the other three. Gouchen the Exalted watched with interest and thought to himself: this level of proficiency is rare amongst cultivators, wonder who his teacher is?

But Chu Wanning had an air of aloofness that didn't welcome small talk, and Gouchen the Exalted knew better than to pry.

Once all the preparations had been made, the group waded into the freezing waters of Jincheng Lake together.

Owing to the charm, they moved unhindered in water as on land. A boundless underwater world slowly came into view as they approached the bottom.

The bottom of the lake was covered in fine white sand, water plants drifted gently in the flow, and rows upon rows of finely detailed buildings lined the sides of criss-crossing streets. All kinds of monsters and beasts came and went on the streets and in the alleys; even some creatures that normally couldn't coexist lived in harmony here.

Gouchen said: "Jincheng Lake has plentiful spiritual energy, and thus embodies a kind of paradise. The creatures that make their homes here stay for generations without ever leaving, so many things are quite a bit different from what you might expect to see in the human realm. You're welcome to look around if you wish."

As he spoke, a snow white rabbit spirit with scarlet eyes rode past on a tiger. The rabbit was dressed in white robes, all pomp and poise with a look of arrogance as it ceaselessly berated the tiger to go faster. The tiger, on the other hand, was meek and obedient, without so much as a hint of dignity.

The group watched, speechless: "....."

Gouchen the Exalted led them along the main path. Countless shops crowded both sides of the street, and all kinds of creatures passed them by. Soon enough, they arrived at the center of the city where even more demons were gathered, making for quite the strange sight.

"Jincheng Lake rarely has any contact with the outside world, but you can barter for nearly anything you need here."

Xue Meng asked: "Legend has it that Jincheng Lake was formed from your blood, so wouldn't that make you the master of this place, then, since it's your spiritual energy that's sustaining everything here?"

"I wouldn't go that far." Gouchen smiled a little, "Besides, that's all in the past already. I left the realm of gods long ago, and my spiritual strength is nothing like what it used to be. Thinking back now, those heaven and earth-shattering things seem almost like they happened in a dream, what relation does any of it have with the current me? Right now, I'm just a mere swordsmith."

He showed them around the city center as he spoke. The creatures at the bottom of the lake, having lived with Gouchen the Exalted all this time, seemed to have forgotten his status as a founding god, and didn't have much of a reaction even when he walked by them, busy minding their own business peddling their wares.

"Fish blood mantou, freshly made!"

"Skin of Shuairan Snake, premium clothing material, only three feet left! Once it's all gone you'll have to wait for my next shedding~"

"Selling squid ink brow filler, made with fresh ink spat just this morning by yours truly, it'll do wonders for your eyebrows——hey, hey wait, miss, don't leave!"

The market was inundated with the sounds of various creatures hawking their wares, and the unusual sights were no less to be marveled at.

A headless ghost sat by its stall, selling combs and makeup. It held a comb between two fingers with long, scarlet-painted nails as it brushed the hair on its own bloody head that was resting on its knees, offering in a soft voice: "High quality bone combs, take one home with you today."

Xue Meng's eyes were wide as he glanced left and right. He saw an apothecary to the side staffed by merfolks selling all kinds of medicinal herbs that he's never even seen before and was just about to go over and see if he could bring some home for his mother when an ear-piercingly shrill voice rang out from behind him: "Make way, make way! Let me through!"

Xue Meng's foot froze mid-step, but there was no one there when he turned to look. Gouchen smiled: "Look carefully, under your foot."

Sure enough, Xue Meng squinted and saw a pile of tiny rocks moving on its own.

"Well that's new, even rocks can walk here. Is it a rock spirit or something?" Xue Meng mumbled.

Chu Wanning corrected him: "Bug^[17]."

"Bougie?"

"....." Chu Wanning shot him a look, "It's one thing for Mo Ran to not pay attention in class, but you too?"

Xue Meng dived into martial arts with his whole being, yet couldn't even concentrate when it came to things like literature and history. He sat straight and proper at Chu Wanning's lectures, half in fear of his imposing aura, but everything went in one ear and out the other. His entire face burned at having been caught in the act by Shizun.

Mo Ran laughed: "Shizun's words aren't fair to me, I totally listened in that lecture."

Xue Meng wasn't about to back down: "Oh? You explain it then."

"Fuban is a type of bug, very greedy by nature. It tries to gather up any and all pretty rocks it sees, and usually ends up crushed to death under its pile of rocks."

Mo Ran looked expectantly at Chu Wanning with a grin on his face.

"Shizun, am I right?"

Chu Wanning nodded, and said: "This bug had already gone extinct in the outside world. I didn't expect to see one here."

Gouchen explained with a smile: "This one just lucked out, it's only still alive thanks to the local apothecary. Watch, here he comes."

They watched as the bug trudged to the steps of the apothecary with great effort, where it suddenly yelled: "I can't take it anymore! Hurry and save me doctor!"

A turquoise-colored sea dragon quickly came swimming out. He was clearly used to handling this situation, smiling leisurely as he took out a white porcelain bottle and poured golden red liquid medicine on the bug like it was the most normal occurrence: "Hello smart one, good harvest today?"

The "smart one" huffed, voice lazy while it enjoyed the medicinal bath: "Hmph, not too bad, not too bad. One hundred more tomorrow, and I'll have four million eighty five thousand six hundred and seventeen rocks at home."

Mo Ran: "....."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Shi Mei mumbled: "That's..... quite a hoard."

The dragon finished pouring the medicine and said: "Remember to come earlier tomorrow, any later and even this strengthening dew won't save you."

"Yeah, yeah, I'll come earlier." The bug replied half-heartedly, but then a light yellow rock in the corner caught its eye, and it started hollering, "Hey lil eel—I meant, Dr. Dragon, might I please trouble you to put that pretty rock over there on my back? That way I'll have four million eighty five thousand six hundred and eighteen rocks tomorrow."

Xue Meng couldn't resist walking over to ask: "What do you need so many rocks for? Are you building a house?"

The bug's shrill, conceited voice came from under the pile of rocks: "What the? A normie? Aiyo, I haven't had to see one for so long——how is it any of your business why I'm gathering rocks? Of course it's not for building a house, I ain't that bored!"

Shi Mei was also curious: "What for then, if not that?"

The bug said self-righteously: "To count, of course!"

"....."

Everyone was rendered totally speechless.

Anyway, after strolling around for a bit, Gouchen took them back to his residence.

In a corner of the street stood an enormous seashell, like a folding screen in the outside world, and behind it was a large courtyard divided into six sections, magnificent and spacious. Halls and corridors led to side wings and flower gardens, and bead curtains made of pearls and kelp swayed gently in the water. Some of the side rooms were dark while others were lit with candle light, faint notes of harp and ocarina drifting barely audibly.

Just like in the apothecary, all the servants in the god's residence were merfolks.

Some kept their dragon tails, while others had changed their tails into legs, preferring to walk instead, but they didn't seem to like shoes much, as all of them walked barefoot.

Seeing the confusion on their faces, Gouchen smiled and explained airily: "I live with my good friend Wangyue, who was once the crown prince of the eastern seas. These are the servants he brought with him when he took up residence here."

Wangyue was the name of that old dragon.

Mo Ran was rather fond of that black dragon, since he got his holy weapon from it in the last life, so he couldn't help asking with a grin: "Where is he, anyway? He probably assumes a different form down here right? He's so ginormous, I doubt he'd be able to fit here otherwise."

Gouchen nodded and said cheerfully: "That's a matter of course, but he gets tired easily in his old age, and is probably already resting now after going above water earlier. You'll have to wait for him to wake up if you want to see him."

Just then, a merman with long brown hair floated over and bowed deeply to Gouchen, then said in a soft, graceful voice:

"Exalted God, welcome back. Wangyue-dianxia has already told this humble servant everything, would the Exalted God like to take the guests to the holy weapon arsenal forthwith?"

Gouchen didn't answer immediately, instead looking politely to the guests first, only nodding when he saw that they didn't mind: "Yes, very well. Please have the kitchen prepare food and wine, we shall dine when we return from the arsenal."

They passed through the courtyards to the deepest section. In the center of this courtyard stood a massive weeping willow that towered toward the skies. This willow must be a different species from those in the outside world, its trunk was so thick that it would take ten adult men standing hand to hand to wrap around it, its bark ancient and twisting, thousands of willow vines hanging like an emerald curtain.

Xue Meng's voice was a little dry: "Wow, how old is this tree?"

Gouchen replied: "I haven't kept count, but at least a hundred thousand years."

Xue Meng, startled: "What kind of tree is it, to live that long?"

"Trees naturally live longer than humans, and this one in particular was nourished by the spiritual energy of Jincheng Lake, so it's not really unexpected. Anyway, please follow closely, the entrance to the arsenal is in the hollow of this tree." Gouchen suddenly stopped and looked at Xue Meng.

"Please don't touch the branches. This tree has already cultivated into a spirit, it can feel pain."

But he spoke a little too late; Xue Meng had already plucked a leaf.

"Ah!" He yelled at the same time a faint groan reverberated in the empty air, as if a raspy voice was sighing softly—"ow".

Xue Meng paled and hurriedly threw the leaf away, as if struck by lightning: "What? Why's there blood?"

Sure enough, a stream of blood trickled out from the branch where the leaf was broken off, and the leaf that was thrown aside writhed and convulsed on the ground as if it was alive for a while before gradually slumping to the ground and then rapidly curling up and withering away.

Gouchen said helplessly: "As I said, it's a spirit. Why would the young gongzi....." He shook his head and walked up to examine the broken branch, using his spiritual energy to soothe the willow and stop its bleeding.

Chu Wanning said: "Xue Meng, come over here, don't touch anything else."

"Yes, Shizun." Xue Meng knew he messed up, and walked over obediently with his head drooping.

Fortunately, this incident didn't cause any major troubles. Chu Wanning apologized to Gouchen the Exalted, and the founding god, magnanimous as expected, only smiled and said: "The young gongzi sure is swift of hand."

Xue Meng didn't say a word, face bright red as he followed behind Chu Wanning with his head hanging low. They passed through the curtain of lush branches and arrived at the trunk. The willow was even more overwhelmingly colossal up close than it had seemed from a distance; the initial approximation of ten men was a great underestimation of its thickness.

There was a hollow in the trunk of the willow, or rather, it would be more accurate to call it a huge arched gateway, wide enough for three brawny men to pass through at the same time. Gouchen dispelled the numerous complicated barriers in front of the hollow one by one, then turned and said with a smile: "The holy weapon arsenal is right inside. It's kind of small and a little messy, please don't mind."

Mo Ran was quite curious and moved to follow behind Gouchen immediately, but Chu Wanning held him back, as if by reflex, and said mildly: "Don't rush." But went in himself.

Mo Ran was already used to him doing this; in the previous life, whenever the four of them went to suppress demons, Chu Wanning had always walked in the very front. Back then, he had thought that Shizun was impatient and arrogant, and didn't want to be outdone by those younger than him. But the Mo Ran of today, after his rebirth, saw things somewhat differently. Watching Chu Wanning's white robes disappear into the darkness of the tree's hollow, a thread of hesitation suddenly surfaced in his heart——

Was this person really rushing to be in the front because of impatience and arrogance?

Author's notes:

Weapon search starts, here are some additional information about everyone's weapons.

Chu Wanning:

Owes Tianwen[\[18\]](#), Jiu'ge[\[19\]](#), Huaisha[\[20\]](#), these three holy weapons.[\[21\]](#)
Shizun's good at machinery, barrier, attack and healing. But defense is ultra low, in terms of video games, he's a glass cannon burst DPS rabid dog.

Mo Ran:

Past life he owned Bu'gui[\[22\]](#), this life up to this chapter, he only has a beginner level crappy sword.

Emperor was good at cultivation world's number one forbidden skill, attack and defense are not low. In terms of video games, he's someone that can output steady DPS with no mishaps.

Xue Meng:

Longcheng[\[23\]](#), not a holy weapon, however it's a scimitar of the highest quality made by Taxue Palace in the Upper Cultivation World.

Young master takes after shizun, high attack high burst monster fighting rabid dog. Due to the fact that he can't create barriers, his defense is worse than shizun.

Shi Mei:

Healing all depends on his two hands, if you ask him for his weapons he doesn't have any.

Ch.39 This Venerable One's New Weapon

Inside the hollow of the tree was a narrow passage. They made their way along a flight of steps made of smooth stone, the slippery sensation traveling from the bottom of their feet all the way to the inside of their heart, through the passage and into the bright light at its end.

The Exalted Gouchen's "kind of small and a little messy" holy weapon arsenal was nothing like the size it appeared to be from the outside. The ancient tree was already enormous, but its inside was even more expansive, as if it encompassed the heavens above and swallowed the earth below. Towering shelves packed with tens of thousands of weapons proudly on display lined the

inside. They couldn't even see the ceiling when they looked up. The rows upon rows of racks filled with magnificent weapons struck a vision of boundless grandeur and immense splendor.

And in the center of the arsenal was a smelting pool with waves of blistering heat coming off of the red-hot molten metal, with several unfinished weapons soaking inside. Each and every weapon made by Gouchen the Exalted far surpassed the likes of Zidian Qingshuang^[24]; rather than being marred by the intense, searing heat, the blades and tips of these weapons glistened all the more, radiant and resplendent.

Even more wondrous were the various weapon parts soaring through the air on their own under the effect of the spell array in the ancient tree.

The tiny decorative pieces and ornamental jewels danced overhead like so many little fairies, with occasional collisions that sent sparks flying and filled the air with delightful tinkles.

Gouchen looked back with a smile: "It's a little cramped in here, huh."

Shi Mei: "....."

Hm.

Xue Meng: "....."

Cramped? Then what's spacious to you?

Mo Ran: "....."

Am I allowed to say motherfucker?

Chu Wanning: "....."

Gouchen the Exalted told Xue Meng and Shi Mei to look around and pick a weapon, and that they're welcome to take whichever one strikes their fancy. As for Mo Ran, Gouchen the Exalted was especially interested in him, so he had him try several different weapons, but wasn't quite satisfied with any of them.

"Fengming Jiaowei^[25]." Not the least bit discouraged, Gouchen handed over the fourteenth weapon, "Try this one."

Mo Ran: "Um..... I don't know how to play."

"No matter, just give it a strum."

The guqin^[26] was smooth and glossy in the front, scorched black in the back. Mo Ran plucked at it a couple times as instructed, but the strings began to vibrate unexpectedly, resonating with a shrill tone.

Gouchen immediately tossed Fengming aside; a spell carried the guqin back to its stand, and exchanged it for a jade pipa^[27].

Mo Ran: ".....Let's skip this one." Playing the pipa was really too womanly for him, leave it for those femmy boys at Kunlun Taxue Palace.

But Gouchen insisted: "Try it."

".....Fine." Mo Ran could only give in and take the proffered pipa, but his grievance was a little too strong, and the string snapped under his hand after only a couple of plucks.

"....."

Gouchen stared at that broken string, and after a while, said: "Do you know what that string is made of?"

Mo Ran: ".....You're not gonna make me pay for it are you?"

"Wushan Goddess's white hair." Gouchen muttered, "Spiritual essence of the earth element, impervious to sword and fire alike. But you.....you....."

Mo Ran turned his head to look backwards in alarm: "Shizun! I don't have the money to pay for it!"

Chu Wanning"

Gouchen the Exalted twirled the string between his fingers, muttering to himself: "The earth element is naturally weak the wood element; that you are able to destroy an earth elemental spiritual essence, could it be that the weapon suitable for you is a wood elemental one?"

"Wha?"

"But it shouldn't be....." Gouchen shot a glance at Chu Wanning for some reason. Chu Wanning noticed his glance and asked: "What shouldn't be?"

Rather than answering, Gouchen the Exalted lifted his hand and waved to call forth a ceramic ocarina. He blew into it, and as the sound began to gradually fade, the space above was suddenly split open by a blood-red summoning array.

"Ji Baihua, come out."

Mo Ran's head snapped upwards; Xue Meng and Shi Mei, hearing the commotion, also came over. They watched as the air swirled about Gouchen's fingertips with power, turning the intricate array above, and then a fox spirit with fluffy, luxurious tails appeared from the array, accompanied by splendid lights and a shower of glittering silver.

The fox spirit circled the air and floated leisurely down to land in front of Mo Ran.

The fox spirit was quite pretty; up close, it could be seen that he was male, with a dot of red between his eyebrows and a pair of peach blossom eyes that were slightly lifted, as if somewhat angry yet reservedly polite. He was draped in ornate, finely embroidered garments and held a golden brocade box in his hands. He glanced at Gouchen and smiled: "Exalted God."

Gouchen said: "You should already know what I called you for?"

"This humble one knows."

Gouchen asked: "And what do you think?"

Ji Baihua smiled: "Not bad, it's worth a try."

The two went back and forth, paying no mind at all to the other four present. Mo Ran couldn't resist asking: "What exactly are you talking about?"

"Hm? Is this young man getting impatient already?" Fox spirit Ji Baihua said with a smile, "Speaking of, it's really quite interesting, but before I appeared just now, I felt your spiritual energy and thought for sure that you would be a white-haired old man, I'm surprised you're actually a handsome young thing."

Mo Ran: "....."

Gouchen spoke: "Ji Baihua, serious matters first."

"Alright, I was just having a bit of fun." Ji Baihua squinted, fluffy tails swishing, "What was the serious matter again? Aiya——don't glare at me Xiao-Gou, about this thing, it's really such a long story——"

Mo Ran said smilingly: "Then could you please make the long story short?"

Ji Baihua responded smilingly : "Yep yep, if you want the short version instead, it's actually super short." Evoking spiritual energy, he floated the brocade box in his hands over to Mo Ran.

"Here, take it."

.....That was indeed super short.

Mo Ran took the brocade box, weighing it in his hands and turning it around to examine.

The box was golden and resplendent, shrouded in a luminous light, but gave no hints as to what manner of holy weapon was inside. What's more, the box had no seam or crack, and the only decoration was a pair of koi fish on its top, one black and one white, each holding the tail of the other in its mouth to form the yin-yang symbol.

"How does it open?"

Ji Baihua: "Tehee, the opening method will have to be between the two of us, no one else must know."

Xue Meng asked: "Are you trying to say that we should excuse ourselves?"

Ji Baihua replied with a smile: "That won't be necessary, I'll just borrow this young man for a minute." He waved a hand, and Mo Ran's sight suddenly darkened as he found the two of them alone in a small secret chamber.

"Don't be nervous, I just teleported us. That box holding the weapon is a magic artifact of my exclusive and secret design, that's why I couldn't tell you how to open it in front of everyone else, don't mind."

Mo Ran smiled: "It's fine. But just what weapon is it, to warrant being held in this box?"

"That I cannot tell you." Ji Baihua said, "Holy weapons have their own temperaments, this one in particular doesn't like to easily let its form be known. If you offend it, it will refuse to recognize you as its master even if you do manage to open the box."

"....." Mo Ran was speechless for a moment, and could only force a smile, "What weapon? Such a strange temper. Fine, fine, tell me then, how do I open the box?"

Seeing that he didn't force the issue, Ji Baihua quite approved of Mo Ran. He put his hands together with a laugh: "Since you're so straightforward, I won't beat around the bush either. This box is called Ever-Yearning. As you saw, it's completely seamless. Two conditions must be met in order to open it."

Mo Ran: "And the conditions are?"

Ji Baihua: "Us fox spirits believe in fated love. And so, first, there is only one person in this world who can open Ever-Yearning. This person is extremely important in your life; you must love this person dearly, and this person must also love you in return, and be wholly devoted to you."

Mo Ran smiled: "I see. It's a strange condition for sure, but doesn't seem difficult." He was confident in his feelings toward Shi Mei.

But the corners of Ji Baihua's lips curved faintly upwards at his words: "How could it not be difficult? Since time immemorial, the heart of another has ever been most unknowable, what you think to be true might not necessarily be so. I've lingered in this world for a long time, and seen far too many people who lost sight of their hearts, who knew not their own most beloved person. These thousands of years, pitifully few had ever managed to open Ever-Yearning."

Mo Ran, surprised: "Why is that? Even if you get the wrong person, just try another, even if you have to try every person you know, you can definitely find this so-called most important person in your life eventually, right?"

Ji Baihua said: "That's where the second condition comes in. Aside from you, only one other person can touch Ever-Yearning. In other words, you only have one chance. If you choose the wrong person, then it will remain forever closed, and no one will ever be able to acquire the item within."

Mo Ran laughed: "No wonder you separated everyone else. It'd certainly be hard to handle if the others heard this as well. How awkward would it be if they knew that whoever I offer the box to is the one I like." He paused, playing with the brocade box in his hands, before continuing: "Anyway, this thing sure is interesting. So it's basically a lock with a one-use keyhole, and the wrong key will disable it for good."

"Of course you only get one chance to open it, what did you expect?" Ji Baihua glared at him, "You mortals are so preoccupied with self-indulgence in your mere few decades of life, just how much fated love is squandered without even knowing? Love is not unlike this Ever-Yearning; you cannot so easily take back a wrong choice."

"Haha, worry not, O Great Immortal Fox. Others might choose wrong, but I've got this in the bag." Mo Ran bowed to him and said with a smile, "I won't squander this yearning."

Ji Baihua shot him a look, voice soft and graceful as he spoke: "Don't be so sure about that, young man. As I see it, you don't actually seem to know your fated person at all."

Mo Ran paused, smile frozen on his face: "What do you mean by that?"

But the handsome immortal, this self-proclaimed "believer of fated love", was unwilling to say any more, only sighing softly: "To yearn unwittingly breaks the willow branch^[28]. Sigh....."

Mo Ran wasn't a learned man, and didn't understand this sour-tasting scholarly bullshit, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the fox spirit was subtly trying to remind him of something. Unfortunately, he was too dumb to understand just what that something might be, however hard he tried.

He was just about to ask again when Ji Baihua, knowing that his task was complete, smiled faintly and waved a hand to send Mo Ran back out. Then he suddenly froze and became stiff, and, soon after, broke into pieces with a crash; all that remained was a single black chess piece that fell where he once stood.

It was too bad that Mo Ran didn't get to see this. Many things at the bottom of this lake might have turned out differently, had he only seen.....

When Mo Ran came to, he was already back at the holy weapon arsenal, with Ever-Yearning in his hands. The other four were waiting for him; Gouchen the Exalted smiled broadly at his return: "That little fox is really too much, so much secretive ado just to open a box. Well then, do you know how to open it now?"

Now that the moment of truth was already upon him, Mo Ran didn't have time to ponder it too deeply anyway. He smiled: "Yeah, it's easy."

He walked up to Shi Mei, very casually: "The lock has such an interesting and clever design, you guys probably couldn't figure it out even given eight, ten years. Wanna try?"

Saying so, he offered the box to Shi Mei, very casually.

The brocade box glittered brilliantly in front of Shi Mei, its golden glow lighting up his gentle, elegant face.

"Shi Mei, why don't you try first." Mo Ran tried to act nonchalant, but his heart had tied itself into a knot and his palms wouldn't stop sweating.

This was gambling on his chance at having a holy weapon, he really ought to be careful about it, but he felt like he was already plenty careful. After all, he had already died once, how could he still not know just who it was he cared for?

It's not like he was dumb.

Shi Mei hesitated a bit, but took the proffered box in the end.

Mo Ran's heart jumped to his throat. He stared intently, but a long while passed, and nothing happened.

Mo Ran: "....."

Shi Mei held the box carefully as he examined it, tracing the yin-yang koi fish with his fingers and wondering: "There's no seam at all, and I couldn't find a keyhole either."

Why is there no reaction?!

Shi Mei touched Ever-Yearning, but why isn't anything happening?

Could it be——Ah! It must be! The gloves!

Mo Ran glanced at those deer hide gloves on Shi Mei's hands with sudden realization. He was just about to ask Shi Mei to take them off and try again when, suddenly and without warning, a hand with slender fingers reached over and calmly took Ever-Yearning.

Mo Ran cried out loudly and miserably, as if he had been struck by lightning: "Shizun——!!!"

Chu Wanning nearly jumped and almost dropped the box, but his composed exterior was so practiced that it had already steeped through to his bones, to the point that his inner turbulence didn't show at all on the outside.

Mo Ran howled like the freshly bereaved: "Shizun——!!!"

Xue Meng got goosebumps all over: "What are you wailing about! It's just a box! What's wrong with you? Yelling like somebody stole your wife or something."

"I——I——" Mo Ran was really about to pass out from anger, but couldn't say the reason why. He could only cover his face and howl helplessly: "Oh my god....."

Chu Wanning! Why aren't you wearing gloves?!

Why, when you're so afraid of the cold!

It's all ice and snow out there, we're all wearing gloves, why only you——

Mo Ran paused.

Oh.....

They each wore demon-repelling haitang flowers that had to be linked to Chu Wanning's spiritual energy via his palms, so he didn't even buy himself a pair of gloves to start with.

The reason he didn't wear gloves was to protect them.

But Mo Ran never spared him so much as a single thought this entire time; only just now, at this crucial moment of opening Ever-Yearning, did he suddenly notice that Chu Wanning, who was the one most afraid of the cold, had been freezing this whole time.

Mo Ran wanted to cry, but no tears came. He lamented his bad luck, to let the holy weapon slip through his fingers just like this. His chest was unspeakably

stuffy when all of a sudden, as Chu Wanning's fingers brushed lightly past the yin-yang koi fish, that pair of koi made from metal came to life and began to weave nimbly around the box.

A beat of silence.

And then, with two crisp clicking sounds, the yin-yang koi fish came together and rose to protrude from the surface, becoming a pair of handles. Chu Wanning turned the handles, and Ever-Yearning split into two to reveal the radiant object inside, glowing golden.

Mo Ran was stunned.

Ji Baihua's words rang in his ears.

"There is only one person in this world who can open Ever-Yearning. This person is extremely important in your life; you must love this person dearly, and this person must also love you in return, and be wholly devoted to you."

.....That person was Chu Wanning?

How could it possibly be Chu Wanning!

No way, absolutely no way in hell!! How could he love Chu Wanning, and how could Chu Wanning like him? What a joke!

This must be a mistake. Something's wrong with the box. The box is definitely broken.

He was still hung up on this when Chu Wanning took out the holy weapon inside the Ever-Yearning, and something even more startling happened.

This time, not only Mo Ran, but the other three were shocked as well. Even Chu Wanning's expression changed slightly.

A glistening willow vine illuminated their faces, its transcendent light reflected in their eyes.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Xue Meng: "....."

Shi Mei: "....."

Mo Ran choked on the two words for quite a while before finally spitting them out with much difficulty and even more disbelief.

".....Tianwen???"

Author's notes:

If this is an online game novel, let's discuss how everybody would die:

Chu Wanning: Death from over threat

Mo Ran: Death from dead tank

Shi Mei: Death from dumbass teammates

Xue Meng: Death from bad positioning

[1] 吃豆腐 - Eating someone's tofu means to take advantage of said person, commonly used to describe sexual harassment.

[2] Shen is a star in the Western skies, Shang is a star in the Eastern skies

[3] 宗师 Zongshi, a prominent and distinguished individual recognized for excellence in a field; note that this will be used as a title later on, e.g., Chu-zongshi

[4] Ancient Chinese folklore, the nine sons are different animals each with their own personalities and likes/dislikes; here they are →

<http://att.bbs.duowan.com/forum/201201/08/165251cfv6z3c3cu3obpbn.jpg>

[5] 里 li, approx = 500m, 100 li = 50km

[6] 两 liang, approx = 50 g

[7] 钱 qian, = 1/10 of a tael = 5 g

[8] Elemental here is a bit different from the Western meaning, and refers more to the five types of chi/spiritual energy: fire/mars, water/mercury, wood/jupiter, metal/venus, and earth/saturn.

[9] 天之骄子 fancy way of referring to someone who's both privileged and talented; exaggerated compliment

[10] 鲲鹏 Kunpeng, giant fish/bird hybrid

[11] 紫鼠 Xishu, giant rat in folklore

[12] Gay; originates from a folklore about an emperor who cut his sleeve off because he didn't want to wake his male lover who was sleeping on it

[13] Younger martial sister

[14] 基佬紫 - lavender purple that represent homosexuality

[15] 伏羲 Fuxi, name of the Heavenly Emperor

[16] 麒麟 Qilin, a mythical one-horned, hooved beast

[17] 蜚蠊 Fuban, a bug in folklores that carries heavy things

[18] 天问 Tianwen | Heavenly Inquiry - To inquire about the enigmatic questions in life at the heavens.

[19] 九歌 Jiu'ge | Nine Songs - Songs that are addressed to deities and fallen heroes (There are a total of eleven pieces. Why is called nine songs? _/(ツ)_/_)

[20] 怀沙 Huaisha | Embracing Sand - To drown oneself by sinking into water while embracing sandstone.

[21] Shizun's weapons are named after pieces in "Verses of Chu", a collection of poetry by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. Tianwen and JiuGe are main pieces while HuaSha is a sub piece.

[22] 不归 Bu'gui - No Return

[23] 龙城 Longcheng - Dragon City

[24] 紫电青霜 lit. purple lightning and blue frost, name of a famed sword

[25] 凤鸣焦尾 lit. phoenix cry scorched tail

[26] 古琴 long zither instrument

[27] 琵琶 chinese lute

[28] Willow branch symbolizes the ache of parting, and is given as a parting gift.
Also, Tianwen is a willow branch.

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun
Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

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Ch.40 This Venerable One Cannot Believe This, What the Hell

The weapon inside Ever-Yearning was Tianwen, or rather, a golden willow vine just like Tianwen, exactly the same in every aspect from the patterns on the vine to the construction.

To yearn unwittingly breaks the willow branch.

Chu Wanning wore an interesting expression as he handed the willow vine over to Mo Ran, then, light gathering in his palm, called forth Tianwen. The two were as mirror images, not the slightest bit different.

No one had anticipated anything like this happening, even Mo Ran couldn't believe his eyes—as someone who had been on the receiving end of Tianwen for probably about a thousand times last life, he never would have expected to receive the exact same weapon from Jincheng Lake.

What exactly was going on?

Everyone's gaze turned collectively toward Gouchen the Exalted.

Gouchen the Exalted seemed surprised as well: ".....There are actually two wood elemental spiritual essences in the world concurrently?"

Xue Meng asked: "What does wood elemental spiritual essence mean, anyway?"

"Ah, it's like this." Gouchen explained, "There are five elements in the world, as you all know. In cultivating a spiritual core, every person is aligned with one or two of the elements. The person most innately abundant in a certain element is the spiritual essence of that element; for instance, the Wushan Goddess of the past was the spiritual essence of the earth element. However, generally speaking, there can only exist one spiritual essence of any particular element in a single generation—and there is currently already a spiritual essence of the wood element, to whom I gifted the first wood elemental weapon many years ago."

His gaze landed on Chu Wanning.

"When forging the five top-tier holy weapons, I originally planned to make only one of each element. Everything went as intended for the other four, but the wood elemental holy weapon broke into two pieces inside the forge."

"I recognized it as the will of the heavens, and so made the two halves of the willow vine separately into two weapons. But even so, I was certain that these two weapons would never find owners at the same time, so I entrusted one to Ji Bahua and his brocade box, as a precaution against any unscrupulous scheming. I never would have expected....."

Gouchen shook his head, and was about to say more when, suddenly, a burst of lustrous red firelight burst forth from the willow vine in Mo Ran's hand as its golden radiance changed gradually into the scarlet of a raging inferno. Mo Ran's thoughts were still in utter disarray, and he blurted out without thinking: "Ah! What the hell!"

Chu Wanning tried to stop him, but was too late.

And so, both he and Gouchen the Exalted could only gaze at Mo Ran with pity. Mo Ran also quickly realized the reason behind their looks. He remembered:

The first time a holy weapon changes its color indicated a recognition of its owner and a request to be bestowed a name by its new master.....

Unfortunately, it was already too late. They could only watch helplessly as three characters written in exquisite and powerful calligraphy slowly appeared on

the silver handle of the willow vine—

Ah! What The Hell [Jiangui].

Holy weapon “Ah! What The Hell”.

Although Xue Meng and Shi Mei didn't know about the practice of naming holy weapons, they put two and two together easily enough. Xue Meng doubled over with laughter, clutching his stomach with both hands and laughing so hard that he was almost crying: "Only you could manage a name like that! Hahahaha, good name, good name. Shizun's Tianwen and your 'Ah! What The Hell', Ahahahahahaha!"

Since Mo Ran already got a holy weapon, Xue Meng and Shi Mei also each picked out a weapon they liked——Xue Meng chose a long sword, and Shi Mei opted for a short flute. Neither of their weapons changed in color, evidently not yet willing to submit to their new masters.

But it was no matter, they'd figure something out later.

And thus, everyone returned to the estate for the evening feast in quite the good mood. Gouchen the Exalted had never brought mortals into Jincheng Lake before; he generously invited them to stay the night before leaving, and spared no efforts as a host. The banquet tables were loaded with meat and wine, and energetic drumbeats accompanied their merrymaking. Everybody came out a bit tipsy.

Afterwards, Gouchen had the chamberlain bring the guests to their rooms to rest.

The guest rooms were adjacent to the holy weapon arsenal. Looking at that massive tree, Mo Ran thought of the "Jiangui" that he had just received, and couldn't help calling forth the willow vine to look it over.

To yearn unwittingly breaks the willow branch.

Just what did that fox spirit Ji Baihua know, why did he say something like that, and what exactly did he mean by those words?

He was a little drunk, the alcohol in his system muddling his thoughts, but it just made no sense to him—if Ever-Yearning wasn't broken, then how did Chu Wanning open it?

Of course he didn't like Chu Wanning. As for Chu Wanning being deeply in love with him..... don't make him laugh.

Thinking so, he looked back towards his Shizun.

But unexpectedly, Chu Wanning was also looking at him. Their eyes met, and Mo Ran felt his heart tremble slightly as if pricked by some tiny, sharp thing, along with a faint sweet-sour kind of feeling. Without thinking, he was already grinning toothily at Chu Wanning, but the feeling lasted for only an instant before he was filled with regret instead.

He obviously disliked Chu Wanning, but why was it that he felt so at peace, so warm, when he looked at him sometimes?

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, appeared impassive as always. He saw that Mo Ran had called out Jiangui, thought for a moment, and also called out Tianwen.

He walked towards Mo Ran.

Jiangui seemed to have a bit of a temper; sensing the approach of another strong wood elemental, it crackled with sparks of scarlet firelight, some splashing on Xue Meng from time to time, as if in a show of aggressive competitiveness.

In contrast, although Tianwen also seemed to have sensed the presence of another like itself, it was already habituated to Chu Wanning's mannerisms from having spent so much time with him, and so, despite also being proudly combative, its golden light did not stir into an agitated frenzy like Jiangui, but

rather brightened gradually, and, seeing that its master did not disapprove, grew dazzlingly brilliant, as if determined to show Jiangui the steady composure with which an exceptional weapon should greet battle.

Two holy weapons, originally one branch.

One was fresh and inexperienced, while the other was seasoned through hundreds of battles.

One flared with a red light, like an impatient and excitable youngster still wet behind the ears; the other coursed with a golden radiance, like a proud and haughty master standing atop the tallest peak.

Chu Wanning glanced at the willow vine in his hand with a quiet noise of contemplation, then his gaze, from beneath thick, lowered lashes, turned to Jiangui. He spoke: "Mo Ran."

"Shizun?"

"Take up your....." It was a little embarrassing to say Jiangui [what the hell]. Chu Wanning paused, then said: "Take up your willow vine, let's have a match."

The mush in Mo Ran's brain boiled and bubbled but he couldn't make heads or tails of it. He pinched the bridge of his nose and forced a smile: "Please don't joke like that, Shizun, have mercy."

"I'll let you have the first three moves."

"I've never used a willow vine before....."

"Ten moves."

"But—"

Without wasting any more words, Chu Wanning flicked his wrist and a flash of dazzling gold cleaved directly toward him! Mo Ran, whose fear of Tianwen was already embedded deeply into his very being, was scared shitless and immediately raised Jiangui to block. The willow vines split the skies, entwining in mid-air like a pair of dragons locked in battle, sparks of gold and scarlet flying ceaselessly with the friction!

Mo Ran had never studied how to use this unusual weapon before, but he had watched Chu Wanning's combat style for so long, and combined with his exceptional innate talent, he actually managed to defend against Chu Wanning's attack, although only just barely.

They exchanged several dozen blows in the freezing lake water. Chu Wanning was holding back, but Mo Ran's performance in holding his own against him was still outstanding and exceeded his expectations.

Tianwen's gold and Jiangui's scarlet danced together, light resplendent in their wake, magnificent to behold. The willow vines ripped through the once-calm waters, stirring it to life and tearing it apart—gold and scarlet intertwining, evenly matched, loath to part!

Chu Wanning's gaze was one of praise, but Mo Ran, gasping for breath and utterly exhausted from the fight, didn't notice at all.

Chu Wanning said: "Tianwen, return."

The golden willow vine that was fierce and unrelenting but a moment ago became immediately pliant, like black ice melting into spring water, glimmering as it returned obediently to Chu Wanning's palm.

Mo Ran's chest heaved as he panted for breath, Jiangui still crackling with firelight in his grip. His legs gave out after a while and he fell on his butt right

there on the snowy ground, grievance written all over his face: "No more, no more, Shizun's bullying me."

Chu Wanning: ".....I let you have ten moves."

Mo Ran whined petulantly: "How could ten moves possibly be enough, a hundred would be more like it! Owwie my hand, my arms, they're gonna fall off. Shi Mei, Shi Mei gimme some rubs." He blabbered as Xue Meng laughed mockingly and Shi Mei tried his best to calm both of them down.

Chu Wanning glanced at them quietly, and said no more.

In the green waters of the freezing lake, the corners of Chu Wanning's lips seemed to move slightly, as if in a faint yet warm smile, but there was no way to be sure and it was only for an instant, and in the next moment he had already turned around, a hand held casually behind his back as he gazed at the enormous tree at the center of the courtyard with its thousands of drooping branches, thoughts unknowable.

That night, Mo Ran sat in a guest room with a soft and clean floor of white sand, the walls painted in aquamarine and enchanted to gleam softly with the rays of light that pierced through the water. The window was half open, the pearl curtain drifting gently in the evening breeze, and on the table was a lamp made of night-glow pearl that lit up the room with an easy ambience.

A large seashell sat in the center of the room, its inside lined with layers of soft, fine satin. Mo Ran sank into the bed and called out Jiangui again, holding it in his hand and staring at it. Perhaps he really was too worn out, but he fell asleep before long, after only having examined it for a little while.

Laying on Mo Ran's chest, Jiangui pulsed with a dim red light, as if following its master into slumber.....

Mo Ran didn't know how long he had slept for, but when he awoke, the first thing he felt was an icy chill, followed immediately by a burst of searing pain from his wrist.

He sucked in a breath and, holding his head, slowly sat up. The strange pain at his wrist grew more distinct as his consciousness returned, and he was startled to discover that a gash had been cut into his wrist, and already scabbed over with congealed blood.

What's going on?
——Where is this??!

Mo Ran's eyes shot open.

Sobering up, he found himself in a dark and completely unfamiliar stone room with only a small ventilation opening in the ceiling. The cold light of the lake came through that opening into the narrow space, barely a few feet wide; the ash green stone walls, damp and slimy, glistened faintly in the feeble light.

Ch.41 This Venerable One Kisses the Wrong Person Again.....

The stone room had nothing to see, just plain walls on three sides and magicked bars on the fourth that coursed with a red light. The only fixture in the room was a crude bed made of stone and covered with straw.

There was nothing to do but to lie on the stone bed. His hands and feet were both shackled, the chains clanking with every movement. Even worse, something seemed to be suppressing his spiritual powers, and he couldn't invoke any of it. His mind was racing with anxious thoughts when he heard a sudden creaking sound and turned to see two merfolk enter.

"You!" Mo Ran growled angrily, "You lunatics! What exactly is going on? What do you think you're doing? Where are my shixiong and shidi? Where's Gouchen!Oi! I'm talking to you!"

But no matter how much Mo Ran yelled or cursed, the merfolk paid him no mind. They were carrying something wrapped in a piece of red fox fur, something human-shaped, which they expressionlessly set down on the stone bed.

Mo Ran snarled: "You little eels——"

"Quit yapping already." One of them finally spoke, voice filled with contempt, "You're a spiritual essence, it won't be a bad deal for you."

The other also sneered: "More like a pretty sweet deal."

Mo Ran was about to spit blood out of rage: "Just what do you want! What did you lock me up here for? And what's that on the bed?!"

"What's that on the bed?" One countered.

"The person you like, of course." The other said.

Mo Ran's fingertips went cold with shock: ".....Shi Mei?"

The merfolk did not confirm or deny, only sneering: "The spring of youth is such a fleeting thing. Since the two of you are meant to be, we'll let you have this night together. When it's all done and over with, then you'll find out what the Exalted God went to such trouble for."

Tossing these words out, they left.

The room was deathly silent.

With his hands and feet restrained, Mo Ran couldn't move at all. One minute blurred into the next, with no way to tell how much time had passed. He struggled to no avail, until his wrists and ankles were raw and bloody.

Panting softly, Mo Ran turned to look at the person next to him, wrapped firmly in the fox fur from head to toe with only a long strand of ink-black hair visible. He stared at that strand of hair, heart beating erratically with both panic and arousal.

He didn't know why that creep Gouchen was doing this, but if this is what would let him realize his covetous desires with Shi Mei.....

His thoughts suddenly ground to a halt, as if any more would be to profane that beautiful person.

Mo Ran stared at the ceiling, breaths heavy and stifled as if there was a weight on his chest. He had longed for this for so long, but now that the chance had come, all he felt was unease.

That initial, filthy excitement slowly faded away as a thousand thoughts raced through his mind. He gradually calmed down.

Whatever it was that Gouchen was planning, it could not be good. It'd be one thing if it was only aimed toward himself, but how could he bear it if Shi Mei got dragged into it too?

Besides, this whole situation was by someone else's design, Shi Mei hadn't agreed to anything at all. Mo Ran may be scum, but he wanted to protect, not hurt, the person he liked. He resolved that no matter what Gouchen does, he definitely won't take advantage of Shi Mei when he wakes up.

A long while passed in silence before the person beside him finally moved. Mo Ran hurriedly turned his head that way, voice raspy: "Shi——"

The “Mei” hadn’t even come out before it made a stiff U-turn on the tip of his tongue and went right back in. He swallowed, the jut of his throat bobbing before he finally managed to spit out the second half.

“Zun?”

Shizun?!?

Mo Ran’s gaze, resolute and filled with chivalrous conviction only a moment ago, faltered as soon as he saw the face that was revealed from underneath the fox fur. All of his mental fortitude fell apart in an instant, the barricades in his chest that he had worked so hard to raise razed to the ground, turned into rubble amidst a barrage of cracking sounds.

All that stuff about protecting, not taking advantage, absolutely not defiling — each one was like a slap to his face, every one louder than the last.

Mo Ran’s face turned pale.

He could finally say with absolute certainty that every single inhabitant of this Jincheng Lake, even and especially that Gouchen, was blind as fuck!!

To think that he liked Chu Wanning?

Ugh!

First that fox, now these merfolk, he seriously couldn’t understand what made them all think that the apple of his eye was Chu Wanning. Could it be that they somehow figured out that he’s slept with him before, and still wants to sleep with him even now? Ridiculous! It’s not like wanting to bed someone is the same as liking that person!

Mo Ran raved on the inside, filled with self-righteous indignation, but couldn’t even choke out half a word on the outside, only staring dumbly as that pair of phoenix eyes slowly opened.

.....

Oh god.

He could almost hear the clunk of something in his head breaking.

A second passed, and something seemed to ignite from the wreckage inside his chest, along with a foul stench, black ashes, and a twisted kind of heat.

It was scalding hot.

As if a fire-spitting dragon was suddenly soaring through the deathly stillness of this dark night, as if scorching lava and raging flames had suddenly burst out of the silent abyss.

All of his premeditated reason and self control burned up in the roaring blaze.....

This was the last thing he could’ve possibly anticipated.

Chu Wanning’s usually piercing eyes were hazy with sleep, languid and dazed, like a bamboo forest after the rain, every leaf and sound laden with dew.

Judging by that expression, something seemed to be controlling his consciousness. He sat up slowly, the fox fur slipping off a shoulder and revealing large expanses of supple skin, for he was completely naked underneath, but his back and shoulder were covered in bruises, lovebites in hues of red and blue

How.....could this be.....

Mo Ran felt like he was going crazy.

Who did this?

Who did this kind of thing to his.....his.....his Shizun?

He was Chu Wanning.....

Every bone in his body was shaking in rage, his blood screaming with hatred.

This was Chu Wanning!
Who touched this person who belonged to him!
This person was *his*—

Mo Ran was so overcome with hatred that he didn't even stop to consider that Chu Wanning didn't belong to him at all in this life, didn't belong to anyone. All he saw was Chu Wanning's firm, well-proportioned body, and those unfamiliar marks on that familiar body.

"Shizun!!"

His voice was low and twisted, but Chu Wanning didn't seem to hear his hoarse cry at all. He lowered his lashes, and, like a puppet on a string, leaned over Mo Ran, a hand caressing his face as their eyes locked for a moment, then he closed his eyes and leaned in, those moist lips capturing his own.

Rarely had Chu Wanning ever kissed him first; at the touch, all the fields of his heart dried up, brilliant, frantic colors exploded before his eyes as his heart beat wildly, feverishly.

Chu Wanning's body was cold, but heat flared up all the same where teeth scraped as their lips met. Mo Ran was still agonized and jealous over him having been debased by another, but couldn't resist being seduced by this familiar man, pained and aroused all at once.

Mo Ran was breathing hard when they parted. He opened his eyes only to see Chu Wanning's eyes glassy and skin flushed with desire. His blood raced, and he couldn't help wanting to reach up and stroke his face.

But he was still bound in chains, unable to move. Chu Wanning glanced at the shackles but said nothing, instead rising to his knees and moving to straddle him. Mo Ran swallowed hard, throat moving, but then he noticed, between Chu Wanning's long, shapely legs, an unmistakable stickiness sliding slowly down his thighs with the movement.....

Mo Ran saw red, his eyes snapping open as he tried to sit up in a jolt, but was pulled back by the chains, slamming heavily back down against the bed.

"Who....."

He couldn't bear it anymore, roaring like a caged beast, bereft of all reason.
"Who the fuck did this to you!!! I'll kill him! *I'll kill him!!!!*"

He didn't care if it was Gouchen the Exalted or the Heavenly Emperor himself, whether it was a god demon ghost or the fucking Buddha—he was Taxian-Jun! Chu Wanning was Taxian-Jun's! Even if he was trapped in this young body right now, deep in his bones he was still the Emperor of the Mortal Realm, who dared touch his—fuck Shizun, who dared touch his person? His, Mo Weiyu's, Taxian-Jun's person!!!

"Mo Ran!"

Someone seemed to be calling him.

But he was engulfed in the flames of rage, senses muddled, he seemed to hear yet also not.

"Mo Ran!!"

.....He'll just have to kill them all. Unforgivable. Where was Jiangui? Where did his spiritual powers go, why couldn't he summon Jiangui—he was really about to lose it.

Insufferable humiliation, hateful grudge—insufferable humiliation, hateful grudge!

Who dared touch Chu Wanning? In the previous life, he dug out the eyes of anyone who dared to so much as even glance at Yuheng of the Night Sky one too many times and made them swallow their own eyeballs! And then at night he

would hold Chu Wanning under himself and fuck him until exhaustion, but this life—

“Mo Weiyu!!!”

Just who was it calling him, so persistent.

But that voice was really so familiar.

As if he had heard it once somewhere before.....

No, that's not it.

It was as if he had heard it all the time before, everywhere, as if the owner of that voice had kept him company through the years.....

“Mo Weiyu, wake up already! Have you lost your mind? What're you doing?!”

“!!!”

Mo Ran's eyes flew open.

He followed the voice to see pristine robes white as snow outside the cell, a pair of sharp eyes on an expression written with worry, brows tense and drawn together with an aura of killing intent, it was none other than Chu Wanning!

“Shizun!?” Mo Ran paled.

Then, on the bed—

He whipped his head around, and nearly got scared to death by that face mere inches from his own! This wasn't Chu Wanning at all! It was clearly a dead monster with a human body but a fox face!

The dead part wasn't an embellishment; dead, as in literally dead.

The thing pressed against him, that was passionately making out with him just a moment ago, really was a dead thing.

The fox monster's eyes were empty, its skin pallid, not a hint of life.

Mo Ran almost retched thinking about how he was just kissing that thing while entranced by some illusion, his face an interesting color: “What's happening!”

Outside the cell, Chu Wanning held a cursed talisman between two fingers. Seeing as the fox monster was no longer moving, Mo Ran guessed that he had probably used a spell to rip the talisman from the fox corpse in the nick of time.

He evoked his spiritual energy, and a stream of dark red blood bubbled forth from the talisman along with blood-curdling shrieks as the paper burned into ashes.

Chu Wanning opened his hand, the scorched ashes slowly gathering in his palm and forming into a jet-black chess piece. He stared at that chess piece, expression troubled.

“It really is Zhenlong Chess Formation.....” Chu Wanning muttered, before suddenly looking up and pinning Mo Ran with his gaze, “What food does Shi Mingjing usually make for you when you're sick? Say it!”

“Huh? Uh.....” Too much had happened in too short a span of time, Mo Ran's head was in complete disarray. He could only say dumbly, “Wh-what are you asking about that for?”

Chu Wanning said harshly: “Just say it!”

“.....Wontons?”

Only then did Chu Wanning's expression relax slightly, but his brows were still furrowed as he spoke: “Mo Ran, listen closely, that Gouchen is an imposter, not the actual God of Weaponry. This person is adept at illusions, and knows

Zhenlong Chess Formation, one of the three forbidden techniques. That's why I had to be careful, in case you were one of his illusions too."

Mo Ran was about to cry from indignation: "Why would I be tied up if I was an illusion!"

Chu Wanning: ".....I'll get you out of there right away."

Nodding frantically, Mo Ran asked: "Oh yeah, Shizun, what about Shi Mei and Xue Meng?"

"Same as you, they also succumbed to the drugs in the wine, and got locked up elsewhere." Seeing Mo Ran's expression, Chu Wanning added, "No need to worry, they're fine now. It's just that there was no way to tell what kind of dangers laid in wait here, so I had them wait outside. You'll be able to see them once we get out of here."

As for Zhenlong Chess Formation, Chu Wanning did not explain further, nor did he need to.

It was one of the three powerful and notorious forbidden techniques of the cultivation world.

As the name implies, Zhenlong Chess Formation is a technique that uses others as chess pieces, to be maneuvered at will like in a game of chess. The user typically doesn't appear in person at the battlefield, but rather, lays down a chessboard and manipulates the chess pieces from the shadows, forcing everything from living people to the ghosts of the departed, from beasts on the land to birds in the skies to be at their every beck and call. A living creature under the control of Zhenlong Chess Formation is loyal to the user until death, and a dead creature will do their bidding until torn limb from limb.

However, what the user could control depended on their spiritual strength. Newly deceased people and beasts were the easiest to control, followed by those long dead, then live beasts, and finally, cultivated to the highest level, it allowed the user to control living people.

Very few people in the world were even capable of achieving this highest tier of Zhenlong Chess Formation, but when Mo Ran named himself emperor, he had already perfected the technique. That year, when he faced off against Chu Wanning in a deathmatch, he laid down a scroll a hundred feet long, a chessboard of splashed ink, an army of strewn pieces.

In that battle, hundreds of thousands of chess pieces touched down simultaneously, winged beasts blotted out the golden sun and dragons burst out of the raging seas. Mo Ran summoned endless beasts of both land and sky, and commanded an army of countless living people. A scene like that would be a rare sight even in hell.

This fox corpse was obviously something controlled by Zhenlong Chess Formation, with an additional layer of illusion magic alongside.

Rumor had it that the fur of the QingQiu fox clan's earliest ancestor was divided into forty-nine pieces of various sizes and made into magic artifacts. If one were to take someone's blood and drip it onto the fox fur, and then wrap that fur around something, anything at all, even a block of rotten wood would take on the appearance of that person's heart's desire.

The fur wrapped around this fox corpse was one such artifact. However, the magic only worked on the original owner of the blood; to anyone else, it looked as it always had.

It was a simple task to free Mo Ran. By the time Chu Wanning got him out of there, he had also more or less finished explaining everything to him.

What Mo Ran couldn't figure out was: "Shizun, how did you know that Gouchen was a fake?"

Ch.42 This Venerable One Is a Little Uneasy

Chu Wanning replied: "If it was the real Gouchen the Exalted, why would he use dead things instead of living beings? And even though this man's powers are fairly strong, they're still nothing compared to a god's."

This made a lot of sense, but Mo Ran was still confused on a few parts.
"Was it when Shizun saw this.....this dead fox that you realized that guy was an imposter?"

Chu Wanning shook his head. "No."

"Then how could you tell....."

"Do you still remember what this Gouchen asked me when he first showed up?"

Mo Ran thought about it for a moment and said, "I think he asked you something about your weapon?"

"That's right," Chu Wanning confirmed. "I've never hidden the aura of the holy weapons on my person; they can be sensed with just a little perceptiveness. But even as the God of a Thousand Weapons, he couldn't immediately tell that I had two holy weapons from Jincheng Lake and assumed I only had one. I was suspicious then, but the matter at hand was acquiring weapons so there wasn't a good time to bring it up. I just kept a close eye on everything he did from then on, so that he wouldn't get his way."

"But....." Mo Ran said, "If he isn't Gouchen the Exalted, how could he create the holy weapons?"

"First off, Gouchen creating all the weapons is just a rumor. No one really knows why this lake has so many weapons inside it, so the holy weapons were not necessarily made by Gouchen. Second, this person just let you all pick whatever you wanted from the holy arsenal, but who knows if they're even his to give. Moreover, I just looked closely at Xue Meng and Shi Mei's weapons——entirely fake."

At this, Mo Ran grew alarmed. "Fake?"

"Mn."

Mo Ran stood blankly for a moment, before finally realizing something pertaining to himself. "Then Jiangui.....?"

"Jiangui is real. But his goal wasn't just to give you a weapon."

"Then what did he want to do?" Mo Ran said, looking in disgust at the fox corpse lying on the stone bed. "First he spent all this effort to lock us up, and then he got something sickening like this. What does he even want out of it?"

"You."

"Huh?"

"What you just said was only half right. That Gouchen didn't go through all of this to trap *us*; the one he ultimately wants is you."

"What does he want with me?" Mo Ran laughed drily. "I'm just some dumbass."

Chu Wanning replied, "I've never met a dumbass who could cultivate a core within a year."

Mo Ran was going to continue, but he suddenly realized something and slammed to a halt.

——Did Chu Wanning just.....praise him?

The realization made his heart beat faster, and he stared at Chu Wanning with his mouth hanging open. A few moments passed before he slowly blinked. The thick face he'd always been so proud of was actually blushing a little.

Chu Wanning wasn't even looking at him, still muttering to himself. "Furthermore, Tianwen and Jiangui seem to have something to do with that willow tree in the courtyard—I've read about it before in ancient texts. When Gouchen the Exalted descended to the mortal realm, he brought three willow branches with him from the imperial court. But the ancient texts were missing a lot; I never found out what Gouchen did with those three branches of heavenly willow."

He paused before continuing. "But if the rumors are true, it would seem that Tianwen, Jiangui, and the old tree in the courtyard could in fact be those three willow branches. Two became holy weapons, and one was taken to the bottom of Jincheng Lake, becoming the powerful guardian of Gouchen's arsenal."

"But what does that have to do with me?" Mo Ran said.

Chu Wanning shook his head. "How could it not have something to do with you, you're the one who awakened Jiangui."

Mo Ran sighed. "Like I said, seriously what the hell!"

"My guess is that whatever he wants in the end has to do with the willow tree in the courtyard. But that's as much as I can infer from what we've gathered. I don't know anything else beyond that for now."

This was almost all conjecture on Chu Wanning's part, but Mo Ran thought that, since he was so smart, if that's the conclusion he came to, then it was probably pretty close to the truth.

As they considered these things, they walked quickly though the gloomy underwater dungeon path. When they got through the twisting, winding path, they walked along another one until they finally came to the exit. They took advantage of the fact that the merpeople patrolling back and forth weren't expecting them, and escaped.

The exit of the dark underground cell was right in the courtyard where the giant willow was. When they surfaced, the scene before Mo Ran's eyes shocked him.

There were four coffins placed in front of the giant willow, one of them empty. Lying in the other three were Chu Wanning, Shi Mei, and Xue Meng.

Mo Ran paled and yelled, "What the hell is this?!"

"Those are corpse-sacrificing coffins," Chu Wanning said. "You see the vine wrapped around the edge of the coffin? The other end of it is linked to the giant willow. The fake Gouchen only needs you, so after he drugged us, he had merfolk take you to the cell and put the three of us into these coffins. Using the

corpse-sacrificing coffins, he can transfer the entire lifetime's worth of cultivation from the people inside to the giant willow. It's similar to extracting blood."

Seeing Mo Ran's grim expression, Chu Wanning continued, "Don't worry, Shi Mei and Xue Meng are unharmed. I pretended to be unconscious and waited for an opportunity to dispatch the three merfolk guarding the coffins. The three people you see in front of you are actually the bodies of those demons."

He said all of this very matter-of-factly, but Mo Ran couldn't help raising his eyebrows and covertly sneaking a look at the other.

How high was the cultivation of the merfolk in Jincheng Lake? Chu Wanning's so-called, simple "waiting for an opportunity to dispatch" meant that he would have had to take care of all three of the merfolk in a single blow, without making a sound.

Just how skilled was this person.....

It had been too many years since he'd last fought on equal footing with Chu Wanning, so he was a little dazed when he heard this sentence. It was as if the storms and hails in his past life flashed before his eyes, and he saw the figure within it that shook the sky and earth, his face slightly turned to the side, eyes shining bright like Mercury.

Chu Wanning saw him lost in thought and asked: "What is it?"

Mo Ran jolted back to awareness. "Nothing."

"....."

"I was just wondering, how did Shizun turn the merfolk into these forms?"

Chu Wanning smiled coldly: "Simple illusions. If that fake Gouchen can do it, how could I not be able to as well? Leave the fake bodies here to avoid being discovered by those eels. Give him a taste of his own medicine."

"....."

In any case, the area was dangerous so they couldn't stay there long. They took a short breather and then left immediately. However, when they ran to the meeting place Xue Meng and the others had agreed upon, they found that it was empty; no one was there.

Mo Ran's face went completely white. "Where's Shi Mei!?"

Chu Wanning's expression was also slightly disquieted. He didn't answer, instead lifting his ring finger and producing a layer of golden light atop it. He could use the haitang flowers, which he'd tucked into the waistbands of the three disciples before they climbed Dawning Peak, to track them.

After a short period of time, Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and put the light away. "Something we didn't expect may have happened here. The two of them probably ran away from this area to hide from the merfolk patrolling back and forth, possibly towards the market. Come, let's go look."

The two of them were both extremely skilled, easily avoiding all of the merfolk patrols. They swiftly flipped over the tall walls of the courtyard and rushed in the direction of the market that Gouchen had taken them to during the day.

Normally, there would be no such thing as night and day under water, but Jincheng Lake was different; one could perceive the rising of the sun and the setting of the moon. At that time, the long night had already broken and the sun was rising in the east.

Mo Ran could see Jincheng Lake's morning market setting up in the distance, the bustling city center filled with people gathering into it, and subconsciously released the breath he had been holding. It looked like Shi Mei and the rest were safe; otherwise, the scene before them wouldn't be so peaceful.

On the other hand, Chu Wanning's expression didn't look so good for some reason. He did not say anything, but wordlessly pulled Mo Ran over to him.

"Shizun?"

"Come here."

"What's wrong?"

"Don't go far." Chu Wanning's voice seemed to be laced with some self-reproach, even if he looked as cold as always. "Xue Meng and Shi Mei have already gotten lost, I'm afraid that if I'm not careful, you'll also....."

Mo Ran saw that Chu Wanning's face was a little pale, and it actually seemed to be out of worry for him. At first, he stared blankly. Then, for reasons he couldn't figure out, his heart actually moved faintly and he spoke to comfort him: "I won't get lost. Come on, Shizun, let's go look for them."

He started walking forward while talking, and as he did so, he turned his wrist and casually took Chu Wanning's hand in his own.

"....." Chu Wanning's fingertips in his palm seemed to tremble for a split second.

But the second was too short and too faint; Mo Ran's heart was preoccupied with Shi Mei, so he didn't think much about it, chalking it up to his own misperceptions.

"Fish blood mantou, freshly made!"

"Skin of Shuairan Snake, premium clothing material, only three feet left! Once it's all gone you'll have to wait for my next shedding~"

"Selling squid ink brow filler, made with fresh ink spat just this morning by yours truly, it'll do wonders for your eyebrows——hey, hey wait, miss, don't leave!"

The shouts of the peddlers in the market fell incessantly on their ears, the extraordinary scene really too much for one's eyes to take in.

Mo Ran pulled Chu Wanning along with a silly smile on his face for two steps and, in that abrupt moment, suddenly realized something wasn't right. He immediately slammed to a halt, eyes widening in an instant, and he felt all the blood in his body run cold.

Something's wrong!

Something very wrong here!

He swept his gaze around and, sure enough.....

A headless ghost sat by its stall, selling combs and makeup. It held a comb between two fingers with long, scarlet-painted nails as it brushed the hair on its own bloody head that was resting on its knees, offering in a soft voice: "High quality bone combs, take one home with you today."

As he thought!

Just as he thought! In this city center, every person's movements, every person's words, every person's expressions, were exactly the same as when Gouchen had brought them here yesterday!

Mo Ran jerkily recoiled a few steps, crashing right into Chu Wanning's chest. He immediately raised his head and said hoarsely, "Shizun, what is this?"

Chu Wanning seemed to have had his suspicions for a while now, but after confirming it with his own eyes, his heart still dropped in his chest. He gripped Mo Ran tightly.

"What's going on?——What is this? An illusion?"

Chu Wanning shook his head, but thought about it for a moment. Suddenly, he said slowly, "Mo Ran, have you ever thought about this..... Jincheng Lake

has many different beasts and creatures, and at least some among them must have seen the real Gouchen the Exalted before. In that case, how could they not tell that this one is fake?

The color drained from Mo Ran's face, and he felt a tinge of fear.
"Yeah.....you're right."

"And let me ask," Chu Wanning continued, "if you were pretending to be Gouchen the Exalted and hiding out in Jincheng Lake, how would you make everyone else say what you want them to say, do what you want them to do, listen to your every word, and put on an act for you?"

Mo Ran understood immediately.

Zhenlong Chess Formation!

Black and white chess pieces fall into place, and all under the heavens fall in line. None knew better than him the sheer might of this forbidden technique. He almost blurted it out, but a glimpse at Chu Wanning's eyes, and he managed to stop himself just in time.

How could the sixteen year old him think so easily of the three forbidden techniques?

And so, all he said was: "That would be very difficult."

"No," Chu Wanning said, "it's very easy."

He paused for a second, then said, "You just need them all to be dead."

Ch.43 This Venerable One Is a Sacrificial Offering???

>>brief goriness

Mo Ran didn't even get a chance to respond before an ear-piercingly shrill voice rang out from behind him: "Make way, make way! Let me through!"
Was it the fuban?!

Carrying the heavy pile of rocks, the fuban trudged to the same apothecary as before, where it yelled: "I can't take it anymore! Hurry and save me doctor!"

A white-haired merman swam out, but his tail was distinct from those of the others, the entire length glittering resplendent like flowing gold. His hair was held back with simple clips and draped over his shoulders, and his face, although wrinkled, was well-proportioned, with a straight nose and a pleasant curve of the lips, and those golden eyes were as tranquil as a misty drizzle; it was easy to imagine how handsome he must have been in his prime.

Mo Ran quivered.

This was different from before; where did that turquoise-colored sea dragon go?

The elderly merman glanced at them from afar but said nothing, instead making his way to the doorstep and bending over to take the rocks off the fuban's back one by one.

With the removal of the last rock, the illusion shattered and the fuban exploded, its blood diffusing into the water like a haze of fog. Nearly simultaneously, all the monsters and creatures in the market stiffened for a split second before drooping bonelessly as their bodies festered and saturated the lake water with a miasma of blood.

The water was dyed red, the color deepening rapidly as more and more blood seeped out. It became difficult to see things in the distance, then the

immediate area was smothered, and soon enough, scarlet filled their vision and they couldn't even see their hands in front of them.

Chu Wanning said: "Mo Ran."

Mo Ran knew him well, and didn't need him to say more: "Shizun, I'm here, don't worry."

Chu Wanning was a man of few words, or rather, he was no good with words. He was silent for a moment before saying only: "Be careful."

Through the muddled blood water, Mo Ran couldn't see the face that wouldn't change color even if the sky were to fall, but could more easily sense the concern in Shizun's voice. He rarely ever sensed Chu Wanning's warmth in everyday life, and suddenly his chest felt warm. He gripped the other's hand tighter, answering: "Okay."

Standing close, back to back, they could feel the other's heartbeat and breathing even though they couldn't see. The situation being perilous, Chu Wanning summoned Tianwen, and Mo Ran followed suit with Jiangui, having recovered his spiritual strength by now.

After they called out their holy weapons, Mo Ran suddenly exclaimed: "Shizun, look over there!"

Chu Wanning turned to look toward the apothecary, where the elderly merman was cleaning up the rock pile just now, to see that a couple dozen white colored light spots of various sizes had appeared on the ground. Hand in hand, the two of them walked over, and sure enough, the light spots were the fuban's rocks.

The elderly merman had arranged the several dozen rocks into three neat rows, every piece glowing with a gentle radiance.

Slowly, a figure appeared before the rocks. It seemed to still be the same white-haired merman from earlier.

Mo Ran tried: "Who are you?"

He didn't answer, only glancing at Chu Wanning, and then at Mo Ran, before wordlessly lifting his hand and pointing at the rocks on the ground.

Mo Ran asked: "You want us to pick up the rocks?"

The white-haired merman nodded, then extended a single finger.

"Do you mean to.....pick only one?"

The white-haired merman nodded, then shook his head, pointed at Mo Ran, and then pointed at Chu Wanning.

Mo Ran figured it out: "We should each pick one?"

This time the white-haired merman nodded vigorously before standing still and staring fixedly at the two of them.

Mo Ran asked: "Shizun, should we do as he said?"

"Might as well, we don't have any other ideas anyway."

So they each picked a rock, but unexpectedly, as soon as the tips of their fingers touched their rocks, a multitude of distorted colors flashed before their eyes as the world spun at full tilt. When things settled back down, the endless red had disappeared.

Looking closely, they had been teleported to the holy weapon arsenal!

“Shizun!!”

“Shizun, A-Ran!!”

And Xue Meng and Shi Mei were here too. Shocked and overjoyed to see Chu Wanning, they rushed over in welcome. Chu Wanning hadn't expected the glowing rocks to be enchanted with a teleportation spell, and was still a little nauseous from the rapid spinning. He put a hand to his forehead, the other still tightly clutching Mo Ran's.

While inside the blood lake, their hands had been joined the entire time without parting.

Chu Wanning's status being what it was, he rarely had any opportunity to hold hands with Mo Ran. Most of the time, he could only stand a little ways off, watching the closeness between his disciples from a distance.

And so, he cautiously cherished this rare warmth at his palm.....

“Shi Mei!”

But the warmth that was such a precious treasure to him was, to the other, perhaps worthless like a pair of worn out shoes, perhaps not worth mentioning, or perhaps wasn't even noticed at all.

The moment he saw Shi Mei, Mo Ran very casually let go of his hand.

Chu Wanning's fingertips twitched slightly, and, for a split second, seemed as if they wanted to grab onto him.

But what excuse did he have for that?

He no longer had the courage to like someone.

He didn't want to lose the pathetic bit of pride he had left too.

Watching Mo Ran smiling so easily at Shi Mei, hugging him so casually and stroking his hair so gently.

Chu Wanning's fingertips drooped back down.

With some embarrassment, with some awkwardness.

Luckily.

His face was habitually impassive, so emotions didn't show through too obviously.

Maybe because he was getting older, and being such a stiff person, after that spin in the teleportation array, his chest felt a little cold.

But it wasn't too bad, there was still a bit of warmth left at the tips of his fingers.

Leaning on that thread of remaining warmth that would soon disappear, he slowly stood up straight and arranged his expression and gaze, proper and tidy.

“Shizun, are you feeling ok? Your face is so pale.....”

Chu Wanning nodded at Xue Meng: “I'm fine.”

He paused for a moment, then asked: “Were you two also teleported here by that merman?”

Before Xue Meng had a chance to respond, there came a burst of bubbling sounds. Chu Wanning turned to see half a bloody face, and right after, a disfigured person emerged from the boiling-hot smelting pool with a splash!

This person was definitely no mortal, or else definitely not alive, for no mortal could survive being submerged in the fiery molten metal. But this person, although raw and burnt all over, clearly still drew breath. Chains shackled his four limbs and held him inside the smelting pool to suffer.

He slowly opened his eyes and bowed over and over to the group, gaze begging them to approach the smelting pool.

Although he couldn't speak, he did have other means of expression. They watched as he waved his arms, bloody flesh barely clinging to bone, and a small wave surged forth from the molten metal in the pool to form several rows of ancient script in the air.

Xue Meng, startled: "What kind of writing is this? Why can't I read a single character?"

Chu Wanning: "It's ancient Cangjie script, something I've yet to teach you."

Mo Ran: "Then——what does it say?"

Chu Wanning walked up and carefully studied the writing: ".....He is.....asking for help."

According to legend, ancient Cangjie script was the writing of the Heavenly Realm. It was practically a lost art in the human world; very few people knew it anymore, and even an accomplished zongshi like Chu Wanning couldn't read all of it, but he could at least get the gist of it.

Chu Wanning studied the writing for a bit, slowly interpreting: "He says that he is the spirit of this willow tree, named Zhaixin Liu [Heart-Pluck Willow]. When he was a sapling, Gouchen the Exalted brought him here from the seventh heaven of the Realm of the Gods. Afterwards, Gouchen abandoned this world for reasons unknown. Zhaixin Liu hadn't seen him since, and doesn't even know if he yet lives."

"But even without him here, Zhaixin Liu had always followed his instructions these hundreds of millenia, protecting Jincheng Lake, guarding the holy weapon arsenal. Nourished by the spiritual energy here, it gradually cultivated into human form, and the days passed without incident until one day, when a——"

Chu Wanning suddenly stopped reading.

Mo Ran asked: "What's the matter?"

".....I don't recognize these three characters. Seems to be a name." Chu Wanning said, raising a hand to point at the complex, twisting characters, "Anyway, this person came to Jincheng Lake. He was powerful and cruel, slaughtered everything in the lake, and used Zhenlong Chess Formation to control them. Zhaixin Liu was no exception."

Mo Ran shouted immediately: "That person is probably the fake Gouchen!"

Hearing his words, Zhaixin Liu's eyes flickered, and he nodded twice in agreement.

".....Huh, I really guessed it." Mo Ran grinned, a little embarrassed, and scratched his head, "Haha, I'm pretty smart eh."

Chu Wanning glanced at him mildly, then continued:

"In the years since then, Zhaixin Liu has been in a continuous unconscious state, without even half a day of clarity. Fortunately, the other two willow branches that had once been connected with it in body and spirit——Tianwen and Jiangui——both awakened. Borrowing their strength, Zhaixin Liu was temporarily able to regain consciousness. If not for that, it probably would've already lost control and hurt everyone here."

Hearing that, "everyone here" was either incredulous or apprehensive, the three youths collectively raising their heads to stare at the being in the smelting

pool, unsure how to take its self-introduction.

Mo Ran started: "Liu-qianbei [Senior Willow]——"

Xue Meng: "Liu-qianbei?"

"Well what else should I say, Zhai-qianbei [Senior Pluck]?" Mo Ran glared at Xue Meng, then continued, "I'm gonna say something you probably won't like, but there seem to be some holes in your story."

Zhaixin Liu could not speak, but could understand spoken words. He turned to face Mo Ran.

Mo Ran: "First you said you were under the fake Gouchen's control, but then regained your consciousness under the influence of Tianwen and Jiangui's awakening. But the fake Gouchen was the one who gave me Jiangui, how could he not have known the consequences of doing that?"

Zhaixin Liu shook his head, and the characters in front of Chu Wanning changed.

"I am of the Realm of the Gods, he knows little about me, and is unaware that the holy weapons could affect my consciousness. In his pursuit of the three forbidden techniques, he needs to draw upon my power, but my lifespan is coming to its end, and he has been frantically looking for a way to extend my life. But I really do not wish to continue living, death is much preferable to helping this villain, it's just that I am under his control, and cannot act of my own will....."

At this, Chu Wanning paused in contemplation: "That must be why he brought Mo Ran here. Mo Ran is a wood elemental spiritual essence, that fake Gouchen must be planning to combine his spiritual power with that of Jiangui and offer that as sacrifice to you."

Zhaixin Liu nodded.

Mo Ran still didn't quite understand: "But that fake Gouchen said so himself, there are two wood elemental spiritual essences. Shizun is also one, why did he only lock me up?"

Zhaixin Liu wrote: "Sacrificial offerings have always been better the younger they are, and even more care must be taken when making an offering to a tree spirit. Moreover, the offering must be sated in appetite and desire, satisfied in every need, and their life must be taken as they are immersed in such an euphoric illusion, without their slightest knowing. Otherwise, the offering would have remaining regrets, and the resentful energy would accelerate my withering instead."

At this, Mo Ran's thoughts snapped to the fox spirit monster in the cell that took on Chu Wanning's appearance.

So that was to sate his desires, like fattening up a pig before the slaughter so that it's tastier.

That would also explain why he saw Chu Wanning instead of Shi Mei. He cherished Shi Mei far too much to defile him. When it came to the matter of desire, he did indeed lust after Chu Wanning much more than he did Shi Mei.....

Seeing the strange expression on Mo Ran's face, Chu Wanning thought he was still uneasy, and, wanting to comfort him, asked: "What are you thinking about?"

"N-nothing."

Mo Ran's face started turning red. Chu Wanning stared blankly for a second before comprehension dawned on him and he immediately closed his mouth. A while passed before he turned away in a fit of embarrassed rage.

What uneasiness? This guy was definitely thinking back to those so-called 'desires' just now, daydreaming, even.

Chu Wanning flung his sleeves in indignant anger, and, face frigid, muttered: "Shameless."

Mo Ran: "....."

Good thing Chu Wanning didn't know just who it was satisfying his desires in that illusion, or he'd probably skin him alive in a fit of anger.

He was in the midst of musing when the ground of the holy weapon arsenal suddenly started shaking. Xue Meng yelled, startled: "What's happening?"

Ch.44 This Venerable One Doesn't Want to Owe You

>>blood n stuff

Zhaixin Liu did not get a chance to respond before his expression twisted and he clutched his head in pain, mouth open in a soundless scream. But even though he couldn't make any sounds, the agonized screams were practically audible in that horrifying expression and those bulging eyes.

Save me.

Save me——!!!

His lips twisted into an inconceivable shape, bloody veins spreading quickly across his eyeballs. If not for those chains shackling him in place, he likely would have already vaulted up and violently ended his own life.

"I beg of you.....hurry.....and destroy me....."

It seemed that Zhaixin Liu's grasp on his consciousness was nearing its limit; he struggled in agony but to no avail as a black fog surged out from the smelting pool, crashing into and attacking the body trapped inside. The chains rattled sharply as sparks flew.

Seeing this rapid turn of events, Chu Wanning moved quickly, long sleeve sweeping as he shielded the disciples behind himself: "How can I save you?"

Zhaixin Liu moved slowly, but he could still control the molten metal in the pool. More rows of ancient Cangjie script formed in the air.

"I am about to lose my consciousness and attack you. It is not my intention to hurt you, but it is out of my control and there is no time to explain. The only thing I can do for you now is to apprise you of the techniques at my disposal, pray take care....."

The molten metal suddenly reformed.

"I am well-versed in three techniques. First, Sweetest Dream, a nightmare technique that puts those afflicted to sleep and grants that which they desire in a wondrous dream. As such, even those with strong spiritual powers, who could perceive it to be an illusion, would still willingly remain therein, never to wake.

Second, Temptation of the Heart, using that most coveted by a person as enticement, induces the afflicted to slaughter one another.

Third, Heart Pluck....."

But his spiritual energies became exhausted at that moment, and he could no longer control the molten metal to form more words.

And, just like that, the effects of the Heart Pluck technique were left to the unknown.

A mist of blood exploded from the struggling Zhaixin Liu. No longer able to control the molten metal, he dragged his finger through the spilled blood, a pair of bulging, spasming eyeballs fixed on Chu Wanning, refusing to yield.

"Shizun!" Xue Meng hurriedly grabbed him as he made to approach, "Don't go, it might be a trap!"

Zhaixin Liu, unable to speak, could only hold up that finger dipped in blood. Abruptly, tears welled up in his eyes.

Chu Wanning: ".....You want me to go over?"

Zhaixin Liu nodded slowly.

"....."

"Shizun!"

Xue Meng tried to stop him once again, but Chu Wanning only shook his head at him before approaching the smelting pool by himself and extending a hand.

Zhaixin Liu seemed quite touched. He glanced deeply at Chu Wanning and struggled to wave his flesh-dangling arms, as if trying to bow. Then, enduring the searing agony, he grabbed Chu Wanning's hand and wrote shakily on his palm:

Draw your lots, break the nightmare.....

Do not——lose sight.....of your.....heart.....

Once..... the nightmare is broken.....the trial——ends!!

He hadn't yet finished writing the last word when he suddenly crumpled bonelessly like a pile of mud and fell back into the boiling smelting pool, disappearing from view.

Simultaneously, an enormous wave of scarlet rose from the pool with a loud crash, the molten metal surging into the sky as nine pillars of flame each formed in the shape of a dragon roared up from the ground. Chu Wanning was forced to retreat, the fire reflecting in his eyes.

Suddenly, four tokens zoomed out from the fiery pillars of molten metal to hang in mid air.

Shi Mei, remembering Zhaixin Liu's words from earlier, said at once: "Are these the.....tokens for drawing lots that Zhaixin Liu mentioned?"

He stepped closer, but Chu Wanning stopped him: "Don't touch it. All of you get behind me."

Shi Mei: "Shizun....."

"I'm here, it'll be ok." Chu Wanning said, "Don't take any chances, let me go first."

He spoke mildly, even without much intonation, but Mo Ran's heart quivered. For some reason, the Chu Wanning before his eyes suddenly overlapped with that heartless person from his previous lifetime, the one who coldly watched his own disciple die.

If he could say something like this, then why did he stand by and do nothing in the past as his disciple died?

Mo Ran suddenly felt like he had never understood Chu Wanning.

He also muttered, despite himself: "Shizun....."

Chu Wanning paid them no mind as he lifted a hand and picked one of the tokens out of the air. The token was made of jade, light yellow in color. He looked it over front and back, quietly muttering "Hm?"

"What's wrong?" Xue Meng asked.

Chu Wanning said: "There's nothing on it."

"How could that be?" Xue Meng was puzzled, "Let me try."

They each picked one of the four tokens. Xue Meng and Shi Mei's jade tokens were the same as Chu Wanning's, with not a word written thereon. Mo Ran's eyes widened as he flipped his token over:

“Blass[1]?”

The other three looked toward him at once. Xue Meng frowned: “What’s a blass?”

Mo Ran jabbed a finger at his token: “That’s what it says.”

Xue Meng shuffled over to take a look, and immediately started hollering angrily: “Pah! More like you just read the half that you could actually read!”

“.....It’s blood hourglass.” Chu Wanning said abruptly.

He could read the majority of ancient Cangjie script, and wouldn’t make things up if he wasn’t sure. So if that’s what he says is written on the token, then that’s what’s written on the token.

Mo Ran stared blankly: “What does blood hourglass mean?”

Chu Wanning shook his head: “I don’t know.”

As if in answer, a low rumbling sound came from the arsenal’s towering roof, and a massive copper hourglass mottled with rust descended. Unlike other hourglasses, this one had a cross mounted on it, its purpose unknown.

Chu Wanning glanced at the hourglass, then looked down at the token in Mo Ran’s hand.

Blood hourglass.

He suddenly understood what was meant by “draw your lots”. Chu Wanning’s expression shifted abruptly as he shouted in a stern voice: “Mo Ran, hurry and throw the token away!”

The order left no room for argument; even without knowing the reason, Mo Ran moved to obey, almost subconsciously.

He wouldn’t have known without trying, but now that he was trying, Mo Ran found that the jade token was somehow stuck firmly to his hand, and he couldn’t even fling it off.

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and rushed forward to trade his own token for Mo Ran’s. But at that moment, dozens of thorny vines suddenly burst forth from that rusty hourglass and headed straight for Mo Ran!

“Move!”

“Shizun!!!”

“Shizun!”

Blood splattered everywhere. At the last second, Chu Wanning had shoved Mo Ran aside, but the thorns pierced into Chu Wanning like so many arrows.

Mo Ran in his youthful body was no match for the force of Chu Wanning’s push. But as he stumbled backwards and fell to the ground, the sound of tearing flesh was horrifyingly clear, and Xue Meng and Shi Mei’s twisted screams were loud and shrill.

No way.

How could this be.....

But this was Chu Wanning, the one who beat him and scolded him, who never looked at him kindly. The one who callously watched his own disciple die right in front of him. The one who coldly said “deficient by nature, beyond remedy”. The one who.....

Mo Ran looked up.

Amidst the chaos, he saw the blood soaking through that person’s robes. Sharp, densely packed vines pierced from his back all the way through to the front, at the exact same place where he had been injured by the ghost mistress

before. The old wound had not yet healed, and was now once again ripped into a bloody mess.

The one who.....the one who protected him with his own body in the coffin, who didn't make a sound even as the claws stabbed through him.....

The one who, hiding under the bridge, secretly put up a barrier to shield everyone from the rain and the wind, but who dared not show his face.

The one who, after Shi Mei's death in the previous lifetime, went to the kitchen and clumsily made wontons so that he might eat something.

The one who has such a bad temper and not much of a way with words, who's afraid of the bitterness of medicine and coughs from spicy food, the one he knows the best.

The one he never remembered to look after, whom he hated with gritted teeth yet also felt was quite pitiful.....

Chu Wanning.

Wanning.....

"Shizun!!" Mo Ran screamed as he scrambled toward him, "Shizun!!!!"

"Your token....." Chu Wanning's hand shook as he lifted it. His face was pale, but his expression was steady as always, "Trade with me....."

The hand he extended toward Mo Ran held his own blank token. He raised it slowly, with difficulty, his entire arm trembled minutely with pain.

His eyes were bright and resolute beneath the layer of wetness.

"Hurry, give it to me!"

Mo Ran hadn't even gotten up; he half-crawled, half-dragged himself to Chu Wanning and stared helplessly at that horrifying wound.

"No.....Shizun....."

"Shizun!!"

Xue Meng and Shi Mei moved to come over as well. Chu Wanning's expression was one of exasperation as he erected a barrier with a brandish to keep them out, and then called harshly: "Tianwen!!!"

Tianwen appeared as called, slicing clean through the dozens of vines piercing through Chu Wanning!

But those vines were no ordinary entity. Chu Wanning could clearly feel them devouring his spiritual energy from where they were buried into his flesh. Having no other choice, he could only grit his teeth, grip the broken ends of those vines, and, steeling himself, rip them out!

A rush of blood spilled out instantly!

Chu Wanning tossed the vines aside and let out a breath, then quickly tapped his meridians, temporarily stopping the blood loss. Then he leveled a glare at Mo Ran, voice hoarse: "Give it to me."

"Shizun....."

"Trade tokens with me!" Chu Wanning said harshly.

By now, Mo Ran had also figured out what "blood hourglass" meant. The curse left by Gouchen millions of years ago was no different from how he had tormented Chu Wanning in the previous life.

Indeed, whether god, demon, human, or ghost, they all came up with more or less the same thing when trying to be as cruel as can be.

Blood hourglass.

Pour the blood of a person into the hourglass in place of sand or water to keep time.

The time interval ends when the person is bled dry.

At his coronation ceremony as Taxian-Jun in the last life, hadn't he used Chu Wanning as a blood hourglass, made him watch while he tread on the remaining sects as he ascended the throne, had him bled out drop by drop in front of him?

But in this life, in front of Gouchen's blood hourglass.

Chu Wanning was willing to trade him his own, safe, token, willing to go on the cross in his place, he.....

Mo Ran's heart beat out of rhythm in his chest.

He couldn't even think.

How could this be.....

How could this be!!

The copper hourglass missed its first strike and failed to grab a person. It brandished its thorny vines, ramping up for a second attack.

Chu Wanning stared at him, eyes flickering with a light that trembled faintly.

His face was pale from the pain as he panted softly: "Mo Ran, li-.....listen to me, hurry and trade me."

"....."

"Hurry....." Chu Wanning's face was pale as fresh snow lit by moonlight, ".....Are you trying to make me block a second attack for you?!"

"Shizun....."

The vines shot out again.

In that instant, Mo Ran finally raised his token, and Chu Wanning reached for it without thinking.

But unexpectedly, right as their hands were about to touch, Mo Ran's eyes flashed as he pulled his hand back and instead turned to shield the unguarded Chu Wanning behind himself. The second wave of vines had reached them by then, and Mo Ran met them head on. His whole body was wrapped up and swallowed by the vines in an instant, and dragged to the copper hourglass.

"Mo Ran!!"

Dozens of vines coiled around and pinned him tightly to the cross. Mo Ran turned to look toward Chu Wanning. His lips moved.

Chu Wanning's eyes widened abruptly.

Mo Ran's voice was quiet, but he heard it clearly, there was no mistake.

He said: "Shizun, I'm really not.....beyond remedy....."

So, please, don't give up on me——

But he couldn't finish the rest of the sentence. Last life, he wanted to say it but didn't; this life, it was also already too late.

Whether Chu Wanning gave up on him or not wasn't really important to him anymore.

He just didn't want to owe this person, that's all.

He was really too dumb, and already couldn't figure out just what it was he felt toward Chu Wanning. He didn't want things to get even more muddled.

This life, Mo Ran thought to himself, the one he cared about, the one he liked, was Shi Mei and no other.

He didn't want to exchange tokens with Chu Wanning only because he didn't want to owe him a favor, only because he didn't want.....

He didn't want to see Chu Wanning bleed out again.

His heart wasn't made of stone. Nothing made him happier than to have someone nice to him.

A little kindness, and his smile would be brilliant as the spring.
But if it's a lot, lot of kindness, then he'd willingly die without complaint.

Suddenly, out of the dense vines came a glistening sword.

The sword was undoubtedly a holy weapon; it was ancient, but carried an overwhelming aura of valor. A pair of rings flanked the hilt, and the pommel was etched with thorned patterns. The sword was slender, with an intricate effigy of a bull-headed dragon embedded therein, the blade coursing with an azure radiance that could slice clean through everything from the softest hair to the toughest metal.

Mo Ran only had enough time to see the "Gouchen" written on the sword, not even the "Exalted", before the sword of the God of Weaponry stabbed directly into his chest.

Blood gushed out, into the hourglass.

At the same time, a curtain of water suddenly poured down in the arsenal, separating Mo Ran and the others on two sides, the abrupt torrential deluge trapping everyone else on the other side.

Shi Mei yelled: "A-Ran!! A-Ran——!"

The rapid downpour blocked their line of sight; they couldn't clearly see how Mo Ran was holding up on the other side. Chu Wanning tried over and over to break through the water, but was pushed out again and again, until he was drenched all the way through, eyes dark on an anxious face, lips wholly without color.

Chu Wanning's voice was hoarse:
"Mo Ran——!"

It wasn't very loud, but shook terribly. He himself did not notice, but Shi Mei started and turned to look at him, only to see the usually calm and composed Shizun soaked and disheveled, his long feathery eyelashes trembling as he failed to suppress his emotions and worry colored his features.

He summoned Tianwen, savagery written between his brows, like a bowstring stretched taut. Shi Mei held onto him with unease: "Shizun, stop it! There's no way to get through!"

Chu Wanning shook him off, eyes sharp as blades, and silently raised a barrier to try again. But the waterfall was infused with the ample spiritual energies of Jincheng lake; not only was he unable to break through, the water beat down on him like a thousand arrows, cutting and piercing.

Already weakened from his grave injuries earlier, this intense impact made it hard to remain standing. He clutched his chest and tried to endure, but was still forced down to one knee, face pale as the wounds on his back tore open and started seeping blood.

There was no way to tell if the wetness on Shi Mei's face was water or tears. He cried in distress: "Shizun! All this——for what....."

"What do you mean for what? If that was you or Xue Meng back there," Chu Wanning spat, "I would also....."

It really hurt too much; frowning, he couldn't finish the sentence.

Unexpectedly, a sword suddenly flashed from behind the waterfall, effortlessly parting the torrential downpour in half like cutting tofu.

The energy of that sword was extraordinary and immense. It slashed right toward exactly where Shi Mei stood, and was just about to hit him when Chu Wanning waved his sleeve and used the entire remainder of his spiritual energy to erect a protective barrier around Shi Mei; he coughed up a mouthful of blood from overexertion.

A deep and clear male voice rang out unhurriedly, reverberating inside the holy weapon arsenal:

“I am the God of Weaponry, Gouchen the Exalted. How dare ye crooks trespass on the forbidden territory of holy weapons!”

Author's Notes:

Today's mini theatre 《What did everyone buy on Double Eleven^[2]》

Mo Ran: Oil, salt, sauce, vinegar, pretty plates, cute pots and yummy snacks.

Shi Mei: Everybody is buying stuff, if I order anything, I will only add workload to the delivery man. Though the general outcome won't change just because I don't purchase anything, but every step counts, I won't buy anything.

Xue Meng: Clothing, arm guard, hair ribbon and hair clasp, 《Path for Geniuses After Twenty》 complete hardcover edition.

Chu Wanning: 《How to raise someone's IQ》 complete hardcover edition.
(Note: Please mail to Sisheng Peak disciple dormitory, recipient Mo Ran. Send anonymously, thanks.)

Let's show these two characters that are not formally introduced but are named in the side character listing~ Can roughly guess some personalities.

Mei Hanxue: 300 pairs of jade lovers pendant bulk purchase, 500 embroidered silk pouch, 5000 sets of boutique hair accessories from Yiwu Commodity Wholesale.

Ye Wangxi: Nothing.

Ch.45 This Venerable One Knew You Would Come

>>blood and pain

Xue Meng raged skywards: “What kinda shitty god are you! You fuckin’ blind? Where do you see us trespassing? We’re the ones that got snatched, get your damn facts straight!”

Shi Mei said: “It’s no use, he isn’t actually here, this is just a voice he left behind. The fake Gouchen must have addled Zhaixin Liu’s judgement, to make him see us as unscrupulous trespassers.”

The voice continued:

“Those befitting of holy weapons ought to understand virtue and resolve as a matter of course, ought to be unsusceptible to the allure of fantastical illusions and capable of staying true to thy heart. Since thou hast come, thou must undertake my trial. If thou dost pass, I shall offer thee safe passage and a holy weapon. But if thou art selfish and faltering, then thou art unfit to be the master of a holy weapon!”

Chu Wanning uttered darkly between blood-stained lips: “Virtue.....is this so-called virtue of yours using someone as a blood hourglass?”

Of course he knew that Gouchen the Exalted couldn't actually hear, but even still, anger drove him to spit the words out, even if every utterance made him breathe harshly and pulled on his wounds, he just couldn't control that unrelenting mouth of his.

The voice, heedless, continued to reverberate in the arsenal: "As a test of thy temperament, all of ye shall be imminently submerged in Zhaixin Liu's dream illusion. If thou doth fail to wake from the illusion in time, thy companion shall bleed out and perish."

The color drained from all three of their faces at these words.
Shi Mei murmured: "What....."

So, in other words, the three of them were about to be plunged into an illusion.

And if they didn't manage to wake in time, then they would become eternally entranced within a wondrous dream, while Mo Ran bled out in reality?

Xue Meng was dumbstruck for a moment before bellowing furiously: "What kinda god even are you!!! If cultivating into an immortal means ending up like you, I won't deign to touch another sword for the rest of my life!"

Chu Wanning also snapped: "What absurdity!"

"Shizun!" Shi Mei hurriedly tried to calm him, "Don't get angry, please mind your injury."

But Gouchen the Exalted, that bastard, chose this moment to start leisurely reciting poetry: "Water poured upon even ground doth stream each its own way. Life is predestined, even if thou doth sigh as thou walketh and brood as thou lieth. Fill thy cup as comfort, song interrupted by toast, yet the road remains ever arduous. The heart is not of wood or stone, how could it be unfeeling, words unspoken and steps untread, nothing left to say."

Xue Meng was seriously about to pass out from anger: "What the hell are you mumbling about!"

Shi Mei explained: "It's from Difficult Paths by Bao Zhao, the general meaning is that each person has their own fate, why wallow in remorse and drink for relief, the toast interrupting the song. Since people's hearts are not made of stone, it's impossible to have no feelings, and many things go unsaid."

Gouchen the Exalted let out a long sigh: "How many people in this vast world wouldst be willing to abandon a perfect dream just to save another? The world is filled with such incessant war and slaughter. If a holy weapon were to fall into unscrupulous hands, the fault would be mine, and how could I, the very creator of weapons, forgiveth myself for the sins of such....."

Suddenly, the holy weapon arsenal grew dim, and the tinkling parts flying through the air ceased all movement. A faint light came from above, as if the stars of a resplendent sky were slowly descending one by one, their light illuminating the ground.

An intangible voice in the air whispered: "Sleep....."

The softly translucent light seemed to have some kind of hypnotizing effect. Shi Mei and Xue Meng's cultivations were lower, and they quickly sank into slumber.

"Sleep....."

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth and stubbornly forced himself to resist, but the power of a founding god was insurmountable, and in the end he was ultimately unable to hold out against the lull, and fell into a dream as well.

Inside the holy weapon arsenal:

As the blood hourglass, Mo Ran was the only one still awake. Blood bubbled up when he coughed. Across the diminished waterfall, he could vaguely see the three trapped in dreams.

Chu Wanning, Shi Mei, and Xue Meng, all asleep.

He heard Gouchen's words, and knew that the only way to break the spell, and the only way for him to be saved, was for one of them to wake in time.

But the time inched past, his head grew dizzier and his body felt colder, and no one awoke.

Maybe what goes around comes around; this was how he treated Chu Wanning in the previous life, and now it was his turn to feel his blood draining away drop by drop.

How very laughable.

Amongst them, who could possibly abandon the best dream of their life, about the thing they most wanted to have, just to come save him?

Xue Meng definitely wouldn't.

Chu Wanning..... nevermind, not gonna think about him.

If anyone, it should probably be Shi Mei.

He mused woozily, but he had already lost too much blood, and his hold on consciousness was beginning to slip.

Mo Ran lowered his head and looked down below his feet. The blood that had drained into the bottom of the copper hourglass mixed with the water inside, dying the gleaming liquid a faint red.

He suddenly wondered, if he also fell into Gouchen's illusion, what would he see?

Would he dream of delicate, translucent wontons, Shi Mei's gentle smile, Chu Wanning's praise and approval, and the sight when he first arrived at Sisheng Peak, of haitang flowers drifting across the sky, carried by the breeze.....

"Mo Ran....."

He heard someone calling him.

Mo Ran's head remained drooping. He felt like he was about to pass out; maybe he was already hallucinating, hearing things.

"Mo Ran."

"Mo Ran!"

It wasn't a hallucination!

He abruptly lifted his head.

His pupils contracted at the sight that greeted him——

His voice was almost hoarse as he cried: "Shi Mei!!!!"

It was Shi Mei!

The one who woke up from the dream, who abandoned perfection and gave up happiness, who, even when everything was exactly as wished for, still remembered him.

Was Shi Mei.....

Watching that fragile person cross the waterfall and walk toward him, Mo Ran suddenly felt himself choking up.

“Shi Mei.....you.....”

He wasn’t sure what to say. Mo Ran closed his eyes, voice hoarse.

“Thank you..... even in a blissful dream, you still..... still remembered me.....”

Shi Mei waded through the water, his eyes and brows even more strikingly black against his soaked clothes. His looks were gentle like the first time Mo Ran had seen him, gentle like the countless dreams in which he had appeared in the previous lifetime, gentle like the way he remembered him when his whole body felt cold and he had naught else to reach for.

Shi Mei said: “Don’t be silly, what’re you thanking me for.”

Only when he got close did Mo Ran notice that his feet were bleeding.

He didn’t know when the ground had become scalding hot; Gouchen the Exalted seemed intent on testing just how far a person would be willing to go for their companion, and the allure of the dream was trailed by ruthless torment.

Shi Mei’s boots had already been burnt through. If he didn’t walk, the ground would stay as is, but if he insisted on walking forward, then every step would be accompanied by a surge of flames underfoot, not too hot as to directly render him unable to move, but enough to be searingly agonizing.

But that gentle person, himself clearly in pain, only glanced down once before his gaze grew even more unwavering and he walked toward Mo Ran, one foot in front of the other.

“Mo Ran, hold on just a little longer.”

He said.

“I’ll get you down from there.”

Their eyes met, and Mo Ran knew there was no point in saying “don’t come”.

His gaze was far too determined, far too persistent.

He had never seen this kind of expression on Shi Mei’s face before.

If Mo Ran was in a calmer state, he surely would have found it strange.

Shi Mei had always called him “A-Ran”, when had he ever called him Mo Ran?

He was so fixated on Shi Mei’s kindness to him that he altogether failed to realize that the person in front of him right now wasn’t Shi Mei at all, but——

Chu Wanning.

The ancient willow’s last technique was called Heart Pluck.

This so-called Heart Pluck was an exchange of the heart and spirit between two people.

When Chu Wanning broke free of the dream and woke up, he found that he had switched places with Shi Mei. Zhaixin Liu’s magic had transferred his consciousness into Shi Mei’s body, and likely vice versa. But Shi Mei remained asleep, and so had no idea that he had switched bodies.

Chu Wanning had no time to explain, and Mo Ran, completely unaware of the truth, thought that the person before him was really Shi Mei.

He firmly believed that Shi Mei would definitely endure the pain and make it to him, just like how he couldn't forget his kindness even through death. People were stubborn creatures.

But it was really too cruel.

When Chu Wanning finally arrived at the copper hourglass and started climbing up the towering vine toward Mo Ran, countless tiny, burning thorns suddenly sprouted from the vine.

Chu Wanning was caught off guard, hands burned and pierced all at once. He tried to grab on and keep climbing, but Shi Mei's body and cultivation were both weak, and the thorns sliced through the skin and flesh of his hands as he plummeted down the vine.

".....!"

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath, brows furrowed in pain.
This useless body of Shi Mingjing's!

Mo Ran: "Shi Mei!"

Chu Wanning tumbled to the ground on his knees, his skin instantly scalding where it touched the ground. Brows drawn tight, he bit down on his lip out of habit and refused to cry out.

This kind of expression would look stubborn and fierce on his own face, but on Shi Mei's gentle, beautiful face, was somehow only heart-rending instead.

He really couldn't compare, after all.

"Shi Mei....."

Mo Ran opened his mouth to speak, but tears rolled down instead.

His heart felt like it was being cut with knives. Through his blurry vision, he watched that thin and fragile body, that frail person, slowly, bit by bit, climbing up the vine.

The thorns pierced his hands, the flames burnt his flesh.

Everything was dyed scarlet, a trail of smeared bloodstains in his wake.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, blood bubbling up in his throat. He choked, and every word trembled:

"Shi..... Mei....."

That person was close now. Mo Ran saw a brief flash of pain in his eyes; he really seemed to be in a lot of pain, even Mo Ran's voice seemed to be a kind of torment to him.

His expression was unwavering, but those eyes could almost be described as pleading.

"Don't call out to me anymore."

"....."

"Mo Ran, hold on just a bit more, I'm getting you.....
down.....from.....there....."

As he spoke, his eyes glinted with determination like the unsheathing of a blade, beautiful beyond words on that usually gentle face.

Chu Wanning's robes billowed as he leaped onto the copper hourglass.

His face was wan and he stood unsteadily, almost on the verge of collapse. Other than the rise and fall of his chest, he seemed little different from the dead.

In that moment, Mo Ran felt like it'd be better for him to just bleed out and die than for him to have to suffer like this.

Even his voice came out shattered: "I'm sorry."

Chu Wanning knew that this sorry wasn't for him. He wanted to explain, but, glancing at the Exalted Gouchen's silvery-blue sword protruding from Mo Ran's chest, the sword likely being the source of spiritual energy for the vines, he worried that Mo Ran might injure himself further from shock if he were to explain, and so he continued pretending to be his "Shi Mei", asking:

"Mo Ran, do you trust me?"

"I trust you." Without hesitation.

Chu Wanning shot him a glance from beneath his lashes and gripped the hilt; the sword was close to the main artery, the slightest slip could cost Mo Ran his life.

"....." Chu Wanning's hand trembled a little where it wrapped around the sword, and didn't move.

The rims of Mo Ran's eyes were still red, but he suddenly smiled: "Shi Mei."

".....Mn."

Mo Ran: ".....Am I about to die?"

".....You won't."

"If I'm about to die, then, can I.....can I hold you?"

He said it so cautiously, his eyes glistening with wetness, that Chu Wanning's heart softened despite himself.

But, remembering that the person in Mo Ran's eyes was actually somebody else, that softness instantly froze over again.

He suddenly felt like the insignificant comic relief on the stage of a play, obscured behind the beautiful flowing sleeves of the female lead, going totally unnoticed.

In this touching and heartwarming narrative, he was unneeded, unwanted.

Or maybe his only use was to wear the ugly face of the clown, and, with an exaggerated smile painted on, act as a foil to the joys and sorrows, the love and hate of other people.

How very laughable.

But Mo Ran knew nothing of his thoughts. He saw the flicker in Chu Wanning's eyes and thought it was Shi Mei's unwillingness, and quickly said, "Just for a little while. A little while is enough."

A soft sigh, barely audible.

"Actually, I....."

Mo Ran: "What is it?"

".....Nevermind." Chu Wanning said, "It's nothing."

He leaned closer, but not too close for fear of accidentally bumping that sword, then he reached out and gently wrapped an arm around Mo Ran's shoulder.

He heard Mo Ran whispering by his ear: "Shi Mei, thank you for waking up, thank you for still remembering me even in that dream."

Chu Wanning looked down, eyelashes trembling like the fluttering of a butterfly's wings, then he smiled faintly: "Don't mention it."

A pause, then he said: "Mo Ran."

"Hm?"

Chu Wanning held him, caressing his hair, as if still in a dream, and sighed softly, "Did you know, the most wonderful dreams are rarely ever real?"

Then he pulled away, the hug briskly over like the light touch of a dragonfly on water.

Mo Ran looked up. He didn't really understand what Shi Mei meant; all he knew was that the brief hug was Shi Mei's kindness to him, a piece of candy given out of pity.

Sweet and sour, a hint of tartness against his tongue.

The instant that sword was pulled out, blood blossomed in the air like so many haitang flowers blown from the branches by a fierce gale.

A sharp agony ripped through Mo Ran's chest. He thought he was about to die, and everything he couldn't let go of flooded his thoughts at once. He suddenly blurted out: "Shi Mei, actually, I've always liked you. And you.....?"

With the sound of the sword falling to the ground, the vines dissipated in an instant, the tumultuous downpour of water abruptly ceased, and the holy weapon arsenal returned to its former tranquility.

*I've always liked you.
And you.....?*

Mo Ran's body had reached its limits, and darkness swept across his vision.

A pair of bloodstained hands caught him as he fell into Shi Mei's arms. He didn't know if he was seeing things, but Shi Mei's thin eyebrows were drawn together as he slowly closed his eyes, and a glistening wetness seemed to slide slowly down.

He seemed to hear Shi Mei softly whisper: "I as well."

Mo Ran: "!"

He must be seeing things, why else would Shi Mei look so miserable as he answered.

"I also.....like you."

Finally unable to hold out any longer, Mo Ran sunk into unconsciousness.

Ch.46 This Venerable One Wakes Up

When he came to, Mo Ran discovered he was still inside the holy weapon arsenal.

He seemed to have been asleep for a long time, but when he opened his eyes, he found that not much time had passed, in fact, it might have been but only a blink of an eye.

He didn't know if it was because the spell was successfully broken, but when he woke up, he discovered he was lying on the ground without a single injury. That savage wound, that gory blood, they were all just a nightmare, leaving not a trace on his body.

Mo Ran was both surprised and delighted in spite of himself, then he looked over to Shi Mei. He didn't know when Shi Mei lost consciousness, but he was also free of any harm.

Could it be that after passing the Exalted Gouchen's test, not only did Gouchen break the illusion, he had also healed all the wounds they received within the illusion?

.....

Although now that he thought about it, Gouchen the Exalted didn't intend to harm them, so this was more appropriate for the initial objective of testing them. Still, it just didn't feel real to Mo Ran, and he still felt like he barely escaped with his life.

Among the four of them, he was the first to wake.

Then, it was Shi Mei. Seeing Shi Mei's lashes slowly flutter open, Mo Ran was overjoyed and exclaimed eagerly, "Shi Mei! We're alright! Quite alright! Quick, look at me!"

Within Shi Mei's eyes was first a flash of confusion, then gradually they became more lucid, and he widened his eyes abruptly, "A-Ran?! You——"

Before he finished he was wrapped in a tight embrace by Mo Ran. Shi Mei couldn't help but be taken aback, but still he gently patted his shoulder, "What's with you....."

"I'm sorry that I made you suffer so."

Shi Mei was confused, "Well, it wasn't really anything, I just had a dream that's all."

"But the hurt was still real!" Mo Ran exclaimed.

".....What hurt?" Shi Mei asked.

Just then, Xue Meng also woke up, and who knows what he dreamt of, but he yelled, "INSOLENT RUFFIAN! YOU DARE FEEL ME UP!" and he shot up.

Shi Mei saw that he was awake and walked over, "Young Master."

"Huh..... Why is it you? Why are you here?" Xue Meng thought he was still in a dream.

Mo Ran was in a great mood, so his attitude towards Xue Meng was also very soft, and he smiled as he gave an account of the things that happened. Only then did reality dawn on Xue Meng.

"So it was a dream..... And here I thought....."

In order to hide his awkwardness, Xue Meng cleared his throat, and suddenly discovered that the typically most powerful Chu Wanning was actually still asleep, not yet roused, and was astonished in spite of himself.

"How come Shizun hasn't woken yet?"

They walked over and examined Chu Wanning's wounds. Since Chu Wanning was already injured before the illusion activated, and by the Exalted Gouchen's design, only injuries suffered within the illusion could be healed, Chu Wanning's shoulder was still soaked in large amounts of blood, a shocking sight to see.

Mo Ran sighed, "Let's wait a bit longer and see."

It took about one incense stick's worth of time before Chu Wanning finally came to.

He slowly opened his phoenix eyes, and when he awoke, his eyes were empty and cold, like it had just snowed heavily in a thick blanket of white. It was a long time before his eyes moved, and his gaze fell on Mo Ran.

However, he seemed to be just like Xue Meng, and hadn't completely snapped out of the dream state in the moment. He gazed at Mo Ran, then slowly reached out, his voice cracking, "You....."

"Shizun." Mo Ran acknowledged.

Hearing Mo Ran call him thus, Chu Wanning's hand paused in mid air, and a trace of warmth finally seemed to appear on his pale face, and his eyes also brightened all of a sudden, "En....."

"Shizun!!"

Xue Meng pushed Mo Ran aside and threw himself at Chu Wanning, clutching his hand, "Are you alright? Are you feeling better? Shizun, you didn't wake for the longest time, I was going to die from worry!"

When Chu Wanning saw Xue Meng, he was slightly bemused, then the thin layer of fog in his eyes gradually faded. When he took a closer look at Mo Ran, he saw that while the other was also looking back, he was holding Shi Mei's hand tightly, having never let go for a second.

"....."

Thus, Chu Wanning completely woke up, his expression cooling. Then, like a fish in a dried pond, it died thoroughly.

Shi Mei asked with concern, "Shizun, are you alright? Does your shoulder hurt?"

Chu Wanning replied tranquilly, "I'm fine. It doesn't hurt."

With Xue Meng's assistance, he slowly stood up. Mo Ran was a little puzzled; Chu Wanning had hurt his shoulder, so why did he step so gingerly when he rose, like it was his feet that were injured?

Mo Ran thought Chu Wanning didn't know what had happened in the illusion earlier, and gave another brief account.

When Shi Mei heard the account the first time he already thought something wasn't right, and now that he listened again, he felt even more perplexed and said, unable to hold back, "A-Ran, you said I was the one who saved you?"

"Yea."

Shi Mei was quiet for a moment, then said slowly, "But I..... I've been dreaming the whole time earlier, I never woke up."

Mo Ran was taken aback, then immediately laughed, "Stop joking around."

"I'm not joking," Shi Mei said, "I dreamt..... I dreamt about my mom and dad, they were still alive. That dream was too real, I didn't think..... I didn't think I could leave them behind, I really——"

He hadn't finished before they heard Chu Wanning say flatly, "That's nothing strange. Goucheng probably wiped your memory of rescuing others. Either way, neither myself nor Xue Meng saved him, and since he said it was you who saved him, then it was you."

Shi Mei: "....."

"Otherwise, what? Did you think Gouchen has a way to swap people's souls?" Chu Wanning said coldly.

He hadn't wanted to suffer for nothing, and had originally wanted to tell Mo Ran the truth. He had also hoped Mo Ran would notice, that the person within the illusion wasn't Shi Mei, but he who had swapped hearts with Shi Mei.

However, Mo Ran's confession towards Shi Mei at the end, to Chu Wanning, really was much too embarrassing.

When he woke, he gazed at Mo Ran's bright black eyes. There was a moment where Chu Wanning thought, perhaps in Mo Ran's heart, he did care for him even just a little.

Such a humble expectation; it took a long time before such a weak and vulnerable thought dared peek out in secret.

But it was all in his head.

The blood he bled, the injuries he suffered, Mo Ran knew nothing of them, and there was no need for him to know either.

Chu Wanning wasn't dumb. Even if Mo Ran didn't say anything, it was easy to see just how much he treasured that gentle and beautiful person. Why would Mo Ran ever look at him, standing in the corner like a doll piled with dust.

Yet when he heard Mo Ran say from his lips "I've always liked you", Chu Wanning still felt like he had lost completely, an utter miserable defeat.

That embrace within the illusion, to Mo Ran, it was a charity bestowed from Shi Mei.

But Mo Ran would never know, that that embrace, was him bestowing charity upon another pitiful soul.

Chu Wanning had never believed that Mo Ran would ever fall in love with him, so he did his best to suppress his feelings, never trying to force his hand, never causing any disturbance, never touching him.

That reckless affection, those passionate, obsessive entanglements, only grew on the soil of youth. When he was young he had also hoped there might be

someone who could stay by his side, clinking glasses beneath the moon, but he waited and waited, and still this person never showed. Later, time passed day by day, his name within the cultivation world climbed higher and higher, and everyone stopped short of admiration, spreading word that he was an unreasonable character.

It was as if he was hiding in a cocoon, and time was continuously spinning silk around him. At first he could still see some light from the outside seeping through the cocoon, but year after year, there was more and more silk and the cocoon grew thicker and thicker, so much so that he could no longer see the light. Within the cocoon was only himself, and darkness.

He didn't believe in love, he didn't believe in chance encounters, and he certainly didn't want to go chase after anything. If he arduously bit through the cocoon, covering himself with wounds, and came crawling out clumsily without anyone to wait for him on the other side, what would he do?

He might like Mo Ran, but this boy was too young, too far out of reach, and too fiery. Chu Wanning didn't want to get close, lest one day he would be burned to ashes by such a flame.

Thus, he had taken every path of retreat there was.

He didn't know what he had done wrong.

What had he done, that even such a small daydream should be drowned by storming frigid rain.

“Shizun, look over there, quick!” Xue Meng’s sudden startled cry brought Chu Wanning’s mind back, and his gaze followed the sound only to see that roaring molten metal was rolling once again in the smelting pool. The ancient tree spirit broke through the waters once more, surrounded by flames. However, the tree spirit’s eyes were rolled back, obviously in a state of senselessness. In its hands, it held that silver, shimmering sacred sword of Gouchen the Exalted.

“Run! Quickly!” Chu Wanning ordered.

No need to have him repeat himself; the disciples immediately all dashed towards the exit.

The manipulated tree spirit raised its head towards the sky and shrieked, the iron chains all over his body rattling soundly, clinking and clanking. No one had spoken, but all four of them heard a voice in their ears at the same time.

“Stop them, not a single one shall escape.”

Xue Meng cried in dismay, “Someone’s talking in my ears!”

“Don’t pay him any mind,” Chu Wanning replied, “It’s Zhaixin Liu’s technique, Temptation of the Heart! Just focus on escaping!”

Now that he said it, the others all remembered. When Zhaixin Liu was still conscious, he had told them once. The Temptation of the Heart technique used the greed and desire in one’s heart as bait to compel people to slaughter one another.

Sure enough, that voice in Chu Wanning’s ears hissed, “Chu Wanning, aren’t you tired?”

“Esteemed Zongshi, Yuheng of the Night Sky. Such a character, but you could only sneakily love your own disciple in secret. You have given him much, but he took it all for granted. He never had eyes for you, he only likes that gentle and beautiful little shi-ge. How pitiful.”

Chu Wanning's face was steely dark. He ignored the noise in his ears completely and continued to run for the exit.

"Come to my side, take up this Ancestral Sword, kill Shi Mei, and no one will stand between the two of you. Come to my side, I can help you achieve your wish, have your beloved love only you. Come to my side..."

Chu Wanning cried angrily, "What a wretch, get the hell out!"

The others had obviously all heard the different terms that voice proposed, and while their pace had slowed, they could still fight against the temptations. The closer they got to the exit, the more Zhaixin Liu seemed to thrash in madness, and the hissing howls in their ears were practically becoming gnarled.

"THINK IT THROUGH! ONCE OUT OF THIS DOOR, THERE WILL NEVER BE ANOTHER CHANCE!"

The voices within everyone's ears were all different, shrieking sharply.

"CHU WANNING, CHU WANNING, WILL YOU REALLY BE ALONE FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE?"

"MO WEIYU, ONLY I KNOW WHERE THE RESURRECTION PILL IS, COME TO MY SIDE, LET ME TELL YOU——"

"SHI MINGJING, I KNOW THE DESIRE IN THE DEEPEST RECESSES OF YOUR HEART, ONLY I CAN HELP YOU!"

"XUE ZIMING, THE HOLY WEAPON YOU'VE SELECTED IS A FAKE! THERE IS ONLY ONE WEAPON FORGED BY GOUCHEM THE EXALTED LEFT IN JINCHENG LAKE. COME BACK, AND THIS ANCESTRAL SWORD SHALL BELONG TO YOU! DIDN'T YOU WANT THE WEAPON OF THE GODS? DIDN'T YOU WANT TO BE THE DARLING OF THE HEAVENS? WITHOUT A HOLY WEAPON YOU WILL NEVER BE ABLE TO COMPETE WITH ANYONE ELSE! COME TO MY SIDE..."

"XUE MENG!" Mo Ran suddenly discovered that his cousin who was running by his side had disappeared.

He whipped his head around and saw Xue Meng's steps were slowing until he finally stopped, looking back to gaze at that silvery blue sacred sword floating up and down in the smelting pool.

Mo Ran's heart lurched.

He knew just how obsessed Xue Meng was about holy weapons. When this bastard first found out the weapon he received was fake, he must've been quite depressed. Zhaixin Liu tempting him with the Ancestral Sword really was the best tactic.

"Xue Meng, don't believe him, don't go!"

Shi Mei chimed in too, "Young Master, let's go, we're almost at the exit!"

Looking lost, Xue Meng turned his head back and glanced at them while the echoing noises grew even more enchanting, "They're jealous of you, they don't want you to have a holy weapon. Think about Mo Weiyu; he has already won his weapon, of course he'd rather you have nothing. You two are brothers, but if you are not better, then the honored leader position of Sisheng Peak will naturally fall to him."

Xue Meng muttered, "Shut up."

Before him, Mo Ran seemed to be anxiously yelling something at him, but he couldn't hear clearly at all, and could only hug his head and cry repeatedly, "YOU SHUT YOUR MOUTH! SHUT UP!"

"Xue Ziming, there are already no more weapons suitable for you at the holy weapon arsenal. If you miss out on the Ancestral Sword, you will only be able to submit yourself in servitude to Mo Weiyu in the future. When that time comes, he will be your master, you must kneel before him, obey his every command! Just think, if you kill him, none of that will happen! Fratricide is not uncommon throughout history, and he's only your cousin! What is there to hesitate? Come ——allow me to give you the sword..."

"XUE MENG!"

"YOUNG MASTER!!!"

Xue Meng suddenly stopped struggling, and his eyes shot open, his pupils red.

"Come to my side..... You are the darling of the heavens..... you are worthy to lead an army of millions....."

Chu Wanning shouted sharply, "XUE MENG!"

"Come..... Only when you've become the leader of Sisheng Peak will the lower cultivation world know peace..... think of those in suffering, think of all the injustice you all suffered..... Xue Ziming, let me help you....."

Unwittingly, Xue Meng had already come before the bubbling smelting pool, and the spirit of Zhaixin Liu presented the Ancestral Sword of Gouchen the Exalted, the whites of its rolled eyes crawling with blood veins.

"Very good. Take this sword, and go stop them!"

Xue Meng slowly raised his trembling hand, and took that silvery blue sacred sword.

"Kill them."

"Kill Mo Weiyu."

"Go... AAAAHHHHH!!!!!"

Xue Meng pulled out the long sword abruptly, a splendid steel blossom in his hand. He swung backhanded and struck swiftly, the handsome visage of the darling of the heavens reflected brilliantly in the spiritual aura of the Ancestral Sword, and, illuminated by the shine of the blade, his eyes were clearer and brighter than ever before, and not at all inundated with bloodlust.

That strike wasn't directed at Mo Ran, but instead he lunged straight for the body of Zhaixin Liu, piercing through its abdomen!

Instantly, the earth trembled, and the ancient willow shook.

The spell was broken, and the inside of the holy weapon arsenal began to crack and collapse.

Xue Meng panted harshly; he had used everything he had to break free from the enchantment. He glared at Zhaixin Liu, his young face filled with youthful determination and innocence. In those shining eyes gleamed both pride and naivete.

The phoenix's chick wasn't only made of martial principles.

"Don't you befuddle me, and don't even think about harming anyone else."

Xue Meng panted as he finished speaking, and rapidly wrenched out the long sword!

In an instant, there was a burst of the astringent stench of blood from Zhaixin Liu, and as he slumped in death, his conscience returned to his body, and the resentment energy within him were completely dispersed.

Clutching his chest, he ardously steadied his drooping body, lifted his face, opened then closed his mouth, and while there was no voice, the shape of his lips were easy to interpret.

“Thank..... you... for..... stopping..... me.....”

Zhaixin Liu’s original body was a spirit of ancient times, matched in power with the Ancestral Sword, and when the two clashed, both sides suffered a grievous loss. The Ancestral Sword in Xue Meng’s hand also lost its spiritual aura, dimming and wilting.

All at once, the tree spirit of a million years dissipated its form.

In an instant, millions of sparkles scattered into the waters, and like fireflies, they danced and circled around them, fluttering and flowing, the golden shimmers bright, until finally they faded, never to be seen.

“Young master, come here, quick! This place is going to collapse!” Shi Mei called.

The earth was shaking, they couldn’t stay for long.

Xue Meng looked back and gave the holy weapon arsenal one final look, then with a clang, he tossed the destroyed Ancestral Sword, leaving it behind. And behind him, bricks and shingles caved in like the crash of an avalanche.

Ch.47 This Venerable One Feels Like Something is Off

Chu Wanning was injured, and the other three were exhausted, so once they got to the corridor outside the arsenal, Chu Wanning ordered them to rest a bit. No one spoke for a while, either standing or sitting as they inspected the injuries on themselves or someone else, recuperating their strength.

Except for Xue Meng, who was spacing out with his head drooping, lost in thought about something.

Mo Ran murmured: “Xue Meng.....”

Xue Meng paid no heed to anyone else, only walked over stiffly to stand before Chu Wanning, looked up, and when he opened his mouth, his voice was shattered glass.

“Shizun.”

Looking at him, Chu Wanning felt an urge to pet his tousled hair, but managed to push it down in the end.

“The holy weapon I picked before, was it a fake?”

Chu Wanning was silent.

The rims of Xue Meng’s eyes became even redder and his eyes grew bloodshot. If not for his pride and stubbornness propping him up, tears probably would’ve started falling on the spot.

“Does this mean I’ll never be able to have a holy weapon?”

Chu Wanning closed his eyes with a sigh.

The corridor was silent save for Chu Wanning's clear voice.

".....Silly child."

A single "silly child", said in a helpless sigh, and the last of Xue Meng's rationality crumbled. Unable to endure any longer, he threw himself into Chu Wanning's arms, and, clinging to his waist, began to bawl.

"Shizun..... Shizun....."

Failing to obtain a holy weapon from Jincheng Lake was tantamount to forfeiting one's qualifications to rise up in the cultivation world, surrendering one's chance to ever stand at the top. Everyone was well aware of this; a mortal's powers were finite, without a holy weapon, however strong, a person was still limited by their body of flesh and blood.

The young masters of the sects in the upper cultivation realm more or less all have holy weapons passed down from their predecessors. These weapons, even if not completely compatible with their spiritual energies, were still considerably powerful. Only Xue Meng, since Xue Zhengyong and his brother had started from scratch, never received a holy weapon from Jincheng Lake.

And so, when he chose to wield the Ancestral Sword against Zhaixin Liu in mutual destruction, it was the same as choosing to give up on his spirited ambitions to rise above all.

Chu Wanning didn't ask anything, and didn't say any more, only holding Xue Meng and stroking his hair as he cried it out. Xue Meng grew up pampered, never really suffering any injustice; he spent all his days strutting around arrogantly, and had never cried since he was old enough to remember.

But right now, tears streaked down his youthful face, and his every word came out broken, like the holy weapon he would never have, like the lionhearted aspirations that he once thought were a sure thing, all of it shattered.

"Xue Meng." Chu Wanning held the disciple in his arms, consoling him.

The waves at the bottom of the lake rippled past Chu Wanning's white cloak and his long inky hair. In that instant, Mo Ran could only see his fine curtain of lashes lowering over the fragments of gentle light beneath. Then the waves picked up, ruffling hair and garment, and he could no longer see Chu Wanning's face clearly in the dim light.

He only heard him say: "Don't cry, you're already great."

His voice wasn't quite gentle, but coming from Chu Wanning's mouth, the words were indescribably soft.

Inside the corridor, everyone fell silent as they each dwelled on their own thoughts.

Mo Ran leaned against the ice cold wall, watching Chu Wanning hold Xue Meng, patting his shoulder, and his heart felt heavy.

This journey to Jincheng Lake.
They came fresh and energized.
But left laden with wounds.

Xue Meng had been the darling of the heavens for fifteen years.
Well-regarded and high-spirited.
But in the span of one day, everything collapsed.

From now on, he will have to use the rest of his lengthy life just to try and forget these fifteen years of cutting edge glory.

When they escaped from the arsenal, they saw Zhaixin Liu collapsing slowly into the pool, like an ancient colossus finally exhausted, like the death of a gentle giant, the demise of the sun itself. The remaining merpeople scattered in fright.

The millions year old holy weapon arsenal was destroyed in an instant.

The celestial tree fell with a deafening rumble, setting off a surging tide in Jincheng Lake. Faced with the enormous whirlpool resulting therefrom, the merpeople transformed back into their large original forms in an attempt to weather the storm; Jincheng Lake was instantly filled with glimmering scales, with little room left for mere mortals.

Mo Ran shouted: "We can't get out this way!"

Just as he said that, a thick seadragon tail smashed in. Mo Ran moved aside swiftly and barely managed to dodge it.

Suddenly a black dragon swooped in, larger than all the others, pitch-black scales shimmering golden.

Mo Ran, startled: "Wangyue?!"

Wangyue let out a mighty roar, and the mute dragon suddenly spoke, with a voice low like the chime of a great clock: "Climb on my back; with the destruction of Zhaixin Liu, Jincheng Lake is soon to follow. Quickly! I will bring you out of here!"

Having no other options, they could only do as instructed even without knowing if Wangyue was friend or enemy. Wangyue, carrying the four of them, surged through the perilous waves filled with thousands of dragons, the waters parting in his wake.

"Hold on tight!"

Was the only warning they got before the ancient dragon burst out of the water and soared into the skies. The pressure hit them like a ton of bricks, the flow of water like a thousand galloping horses against their bodies. They couldn't open their eyes, could hardly breathe, clinging desperately to the dragon's back with all their might just to not get flung back into the lake.

By the time they could open their eyes again, they were already high above Jincheng Lake, soaring through the clouds at the summit of Dawning Peak. Droplets of water flew off from the dragon's large, mirror-like scales, the spray turning into countless sparkles of light, materializing into a rainbow in the sky. Wangyue raised his head in a roar as color washed over the land.

Mo Ran heard Xue Meng's voice from behind him against the fierce gale, full of excitement. He really was young, after all, easily distracted from his worries——

"Oh my god! I'm flying! On a dragon!"

Wangyue circled above Dawning Peak, gradually shrinking in size while descending, until landing at the bank of Jincheng Lake at less than half his original size so as to not crush the rocks and flora in the surroundings, and stayed quietly in place while they dismounted.

They turned to look toward Jincheng Lake, only to see the thick layer of ice melted, waves churning and scattering fragments of ice. The first light of dawn colored the eastern skies a pure white, the sunlight spilling into Jincheng Lake, glimmering brilliantly.

Suddenly, Shi Mei called out: "Look at the dragons in the lake!"

The dragons twisting and coiling in the lake, rising and falling with the waves, gradually stopped moving and then crumbled, one after another, turning into so many specks of dust, and black chess pieces floated up from the lake, gathering in mid air.

Mo Ran muttered: "Zhenlong Chess Formation....."

Everything in the lake, from the sea dragons to Zhaixin Liu itself, was under the control of Zhenlong Chess Formation. All of it was a match set up by someone hiding in the shadows!

Mo Ran shuddered.

Something was off with this reborn era; certain things happened earlier than they should have for no apparent reason.

When he was sixteen in the previous life, there was definitely no one who could command Zhenlong Chess Formation this well. Just who was this fake Gouchen?

Xue Meng cried: "Wangyue!"

Mo Ran turned around, only to see Wangyue crouching on the ground without moving. There was no black chess piece on his body, but he appeared extremely weak, eyes half closed.

"You lot..... did well..... it's far preferable to have our Exalted God Gouchen's Jincheng Lake be destroyed, than to..... to have it fall into the hands of a villain....."

When he finished speaking, his entire body suddenly started glowing golden, and when the light subsided, he had assumed human form.

"It was you?!"

Mo Ran and Xue Meng exclaimed simultaneously.

The Wangyue before them was the very same white-haired elderly merman from before who had led them to the holy weapon arsenal. Wangyue lifted his head, a hint of guilt in his eyes.

"It was me."

Xue Meng was shocked: "Y-you, why did you lead us to the arsenal? Do you want to help us or harm us? If harm, then why did you bring us ashore, but if help, then if we hadn't passed Zhaixin Liu's trial, wouldn't we have....."

Wangyue looked down, voice hoarse: "Please accept my apologies. Circumstances being what they were, there was naught else I could do. The fake Gouchen's own cultivation is insufficient, and he relied wholly on Zhaixin Liu's spiritual power to wield the forbidden technique. The only way to dispel his magic was to overcome Zhaixin Liu. I had no choice but to vest my hope in the four of you."

Chu Wanning shook his head slightly, walked over to him, and began channeling spiritual energy to heal his injuries.

Wangyue let out a long sigh: "Daozhang is kind, but there is no need. It is my time. I am the same as the other creatures of the lake, living off of Zhaixin Liu's spiritual energy, and now that it has fallen, I shall not be long for this world."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Wang Yue continued: "The order of life and death cannot be forced. To have lived to see the nightmare of Jincheng Lake broken, my wish is already fulfilled. But I am terribly remorseful for having involved you four in the perils."

Chu Wanning said: "No matter.Do you know who the pretender is, and what he wants?"

Wangyue replied: "I do not know who he is, but his goal is most likely to obtain Zhaixin Liu's power in order to command the three forbidden techniques."

Chu Wanning muttered: "The forbidden techniques require an incredible amount of spiritual energy, it would indeed be much easier with the help of an ancient tree spirit."

"Yes, that person said the same. He said that ancient spirits are immensely powerful but extremely difficult to find. The only one traceable from the ancient records was Zhaixin Liu."

"He only appeared fairly recently, and since taking control of Jincheng Lake, he spent all his time at the bottom of the lake, using Zhaixin Liu's power to practice the forbidden techniques of 'Rebirth' and 'Zhenlong Chess Formation.'"

Wangyue sighed, his eyes somewhat empty and dull.

Mo Ran felt his heart drop.

Sure enough, this trip to Jincheng Lake was completely different from the one in the past life, and all of the changes happened not long ago. Just what went wrong to make everything change course?

"He didn't have the strength to control living creatures, so he killed countless creatures in the lake and tried to control the dead instead. He managed that, and in a mere few weeks times, he had massacred practically all the creatures in the lake and turned them into chess pieces. He left only a few alive to experiment on, myself being one."

Mo Ran asked: "When you came out of the water to meet me, were you being controlled by the fake Gouchen?"

"No." Wang Yue slowly closed his eyes, "He may be able to control the others, like the fox spirit or even Zhaixin Liu, but he cannot control me. I am a spiritual beast tamed by the Exalted Gouchen at the creation of the world, millennia ago. When I submitted to being his steed, I was branded with his seal, to be loyal to one master only in life and in death."

"Then why did you....."

"It was an act, I had no choice." Wangyue sighed, "The intruder couldn't control me completely, but the brand of the Exalted Gouchen is millions of years old, its effectiveness a mere fraction of the original. A portion of my body did fall under the fake Gouchen's influence—the reason I was mute at our first meeting was because that person had control of my throat, only when his magic was dispelled was I able to speak again."

Mo Ran asked: "Did that fake Gouchen know you were pretending?"

"I doubt it." Wangyue looked at Mo Ran as he spoke, "He had planned to take your spiritual core today in order to extend Zhaixin Liu's life. But he didn't anticipate me bringing you four back to the holy weapon arsenal to destroy the ancient willow, and took no precautions against my interference."

But Chu Wanning suddenly spoke: "Perhaps it's not that he did not take precautions against you, but rather that he did not have the strength to spare for such."

"What does Daozhang mean?"

Chu Wanning said: "There's something else that's odd about the pretender."

Author's Notes:

Today's mini theater is, modern edition of a segment of the plot. While writing I had a universe brain moment, it felt that Mo Ran was missing something in arc, after some contemplating, the thing he's missing is cigarettes. LOL

《After Jincheng Lake's Destruction, Modern Edition》 Start, Du Du Du!

Inside the corridor, everyone fell silent as they each dwelled in their own thoughts.

Mo Ran leaned against the ice cold wall, watching Chu Wanning holding Xue Meng, patting his shoulder, and his heart felt heavy.

But Mo Ran didn't say a single word, he lowered his head and fished out a box of cigarettes, there was only one left inside it. He held it between his lips, with a clicking sound from the lighter, a cluster of sparks luminiated and then dimmed, the light reflected in his eyes looked like a newly budded poppy.

He deeply inhaled a puff of smoke, then slowly breathed it out, amidst the addictive nicotine, Mo Ran raised his eyelids. He gazed at them once again with nonchalance, then turns his face away.

He leaned against the wall, and slid one hand into his pocket.

No one spoke, rationality allowed Mo Ran to tell himself, give them a bit of time, at least one cigerette's worth of time, the little peacock needed soothing.

He was someone with a heavy addiction to cigarettes, and enjoyed the decaying taste of tar oil dissipating between his teeth.

But that day, he couldn't stop himself from feeling resentment, this cigarette seemed especially long. Damn it, he smoked for this long, this vigorous, but it fucking still had more than half left.

Mo Ran suddenly felt a sort of inexplicable irritation, he blamed this irritation on the unsatisfying smoke. He extinguished the cigarette on the wall. Then raised his head, with one hand still in his pocket, he walked towards Chu Wanning with an air of certainty.

“Mr. Chu.” He stared at Chu Wanning’s face, abruptly tugged at Xue Meng and straightened him up, then he dragged Xue Meng next to himself, a lazy hint of smile appeared in the corner of his lips.

“Don’t just comfort my little brother, I’m upset too. How’s this, you are a good person, why not see it through to the end...”

His voice was like smoker’s, low and hoarse, thus he cleared his throat.

“And comfort this gege too.”

Chu Wanning was momentarily speechless.

Absurd, the thought that he had at that time was: This rascal’s “this gege”, was it him behaving like a jackass, or was it the textbook meaning, to remark that his relation to Xue Meng is “a male relative that is the same generation but is older than one’s self”?

Ch.48 This Venerable One’s Old Dragon

>>passing noncon mention, not of main characters

Now that he mentioned it, Mo Ran couldn’t help but agree.
Shizun was right.

There was a faint odor on the fake Gouchen. Mo Ran thought he was only imagining it, but since Chu Wanning also noticed it, then there could be no mistake.

The smell of death.

—Not only was this Gouchen not the god himself, he wasn't even a living person!

In other words, the one behind all this was just pulling the strings on a corpse dressed as the God of Weaponry. The real puppeteer himself wasn't even here.

His thoughts were interrupted by a low, sorrowful chuckle from the direction of Jincheng Lake.

Immediately following, a deathly pale body shot out from the water like an arrow as the fake Gouchen leapt into the air. But both his appearance and behavior had become frightening, his skin wrinkled all over like a snake in the midst of molting, or a silkworm trying to break through its cocoon.

“Yuheng of the Night Sky, the Beidou Immortal. Chu-zongshi, you really do live up to your name.”

The fake Gouchen levitated above the crystalline water of the lake, face twisting into some semblance of a gnarled smirk even as pieces peeled off.

“How did Rufeng Sect let someone like you slip through their fingers back then?”

Chu Wanning's voice was frosty: “Just who exactly are you?”

“You don't need to know who I am.” The fake Gouchen said, “And I won't let you know who I am, either. You can just think of me as someone who should have died long ago but crawled out of hell just to take the lives of you righteous, honorable types!”

Wangyue rumbled: “Shameless! Zhaixin Liu has been destroyed! With your strength alone, without the help of the holy tree, you have no way of using the forbidden techniques, or of carrying out further transgressions!”

The fake Gouchen sneered: “You old eel, on your last breath and still trying to get in my way. What makes you think you have the right to speak here? Get lost!”

Chu Wanning suddenly spoke: “And do you think that you, as a white chess piece, have any right to speak?”

The “white chess piece”, as implied by the name, is a special type of piece in Zhenlong Chess Formation.

The user can place a portion of their soul into a newly deceased body and fuse the two to form a chess piece that is white as pure jade.

The “white chess piece” was different from the common “black chess piece” that merely obeyed commands. In other words, a white chess piece was a stand-in for the user; aside from having weaker spiritual power than the original, they could think and act independently, and the things they see and hear could be conveyed to the original user.

The fake Gouchen's identity was exposed, but his reaction was to laugh and clap: “Very good, good! Good!!”

After the three cries of “good”, the fake Gouchen's face became even more broken and contorted. It seemed that the spell was nearing its end and unable to support the white chess piece for much longer, and the original form of the corpse was starting to show.

“Chu Wanning, don't get too full of yourself. Do you really think that this will stop me? Even if Zhaixin Liu was destroyed, my original can always find other sources of spiritual energy. But you, on the other hand...”

As he spoke, his eyes, which grew dimmer and more defocused by the second, suddenly swept past Chu Wanning to land on Mo Ran with malicious intent.

Mo Ran was struck by a sudden wave of apprehension!

The fake Gouchen said slowly, mockingly: "If you think that I'm the only one in this world who knows the three forbidden techniques, then I'm afraid you won't have much longer to live."

Chu Wanning's eyebrows lowered in a frown and he demanded sternly: "What do you mean by that?"

But the fake Gouchen suddenly stopped talking. He froze and then exploded into foul-smelling pieces, a jade-white chess piece shooting out from his body and whirling in the air, backlit by the rising sun, before falling into Jincheng Lake with a plop.

It seemed that the puppeteer in the shadows, having lost the assistance from Zhaixin Liu, had exhausted his spiritual energy.

Simultaneously, Wangyue, who also relied on Zhaixin Liu's spiritual energy to survive, staggered and fell to the ground with a thud. He murmured: "Ah....."

Xue Meng let out a startled cry: "Wangyue!"

Mo Ran also exclaimed: "Wangyue!"

The four of them gathered around the old dragon. Wangyue was barely hanging on, lips colorless. He looked at them, and spoke with a voice raspy like the setting sun.

"Don't..... don't believe that person's nonsense. There was more..... more falsehood than truth in his words....."

Shi Mei's face was full of worry and sorrow, he said softly: "Elder, please don't talk anymore, and let me heal you."

"No, there's no need. If even your master couldn't do it..... then..... you....." Wangyue coughed roughly several times, then said, panting, "In these years, many came seeking weapons. But..... when that villain came, Zhaixin Liu didn't want the holy weapons left behind by their master to be used by him, and so destroyed them all. The only ones remaining..... were.....were a willow vine equal to it in power, and the, the sword of the Exalted God....."

At this mention, Xue Meng's expression grew darker, mouth set wordlessly in a thin line.

"The willow vine..... went to this young Daozhang." Wangyue looked at Mo Ran, "That day, by the lakeside, I had said to you that even if you were evil in the past, I will not stop you, and that I can only hope that you will pursue goodness in the future..... but in actuality..... in actuality, following my Master's wishes, holy weapons should belong only to the virtuous. That's why, I hope that you..... that you will....."

Mo Ran saw that it was already difficult for him to speak, and so interrupted: "Don't worry, Elder, I understand."

The merman murmured: "That's good..... that's good..... then I can..... rest easy....."

He gazed skyward, lips trembling slightly.

"It is said that when one goes to Jincheng Lake seeking a weapon, a creature from the lake will..... will make a request. Most of those requests.....

were for gauging the seeker's moral character, but there were the occasional exceptions....."

Wangyue's voice grew quieter and quieter, tens of thousands of years flitting past his eyes like a carousel lantern.

"I had an agreement with my Master; when he left, I was to stay and guard Jincheng Lake, without leaving..... but who could have known that I would be standing guard for millennia upon millennia..... the sights I beheld in my youth, the mountains and rivers..... I never got to..... to.....see.....again....."

He turned his head slowly to gaze beseechingly toward Mo Ran, eyes flickering with a warm wetness.

In that instant, Mo Ran suddenly knew what he was about to say.

Sure enough, Wangyue said softly: "Young Daozhang, the plum blossoms at the waist of the mountain bloom splendidly throughout the year, I was very fond of them when I was young. Even though you already got your holy weapon, would you still..... still be willing to....."

Mo Ran was just about to say, yes, I'll go get you a branch.

But before he could even say yes, the light in Wangyue's golden eyes abruptly went out.

Jiangnan has little else, but a gift of spring in the form of a blossoming branch^[3].

Snow-tipped peaks towered majestically in the distance, gleaming gold dancing resplendent on the lake surface as the rising sun bathed the waters in its red-hued light, the waves and sprays shattering the rays into glimmering crimson.

Wangyue had passed.

He was one of the first dragons at the creation of the world, had once been world-shakingly powerful, had once bowed in servitude and carried his master to all corners of the world. Everyone said that the brand forced his submission, but it was out of respect for Gouchen that he kept his promise of millennia.

In this vast world, few remained who remembered the founding of the world. But Wangyue knew that although the real Gouchen the Exalted had demonic blood coursing through his veins, his mother was taken against her will; he abhorred the demons, and stood with Fuxi against the demonic invasion, using his own powerful demonic blood to forge the first true sword of the world for Fuxi and aiding him in sweeping the demon race from the land.

But after the unification of heaven and earth, Fuxi harbored misgivings and resentment toward Gouchen the Exalted due to his half demon blood. Gouchen the Exalted was no fool; a hundred years later, he excused himself from the realm of the gods of his own accord, and came to the realm of man.

During his journey, he saw endless suffering and slaughter. He felt that he shouldn't have brought the "sword" into existence, and was filled with remorse. So he gathered a good deal of the weapons he had left in the human realm, sealed them in the arsenal at Jincheng Lake, planted Zhaixin Liu as guardian, and instructed the creatures in the lake that of those who come seeking, only the virtuous are befitting.

But now, Gouchen was no more, and Wangyue had passed.

Henceforth there are no more holy weapons inside Jincheng Lake, no more merfolk. All of the sins and repentance, distortion and dedication, with the thunderous fall of Zhaixin Liu, had scattered like smoke and ashes.

For a moment, no one spoke. In the ferocious snowstorm, the scarlet words written on the stone tablet by the side of Jincheng Lake——"The Path Forward is

Difficult"—were still the same as when they first saw it, and the now-serene surface of the lake hid all of the calamity and suffering that had transpired beneath.

Just like when they had first climbed up Dawning Peak, completely unaware of the bloody story hidden behind "The Path Forward is Difficult".

Mo Ran looked up at the sky. Above the precipice, a lone eagle soared against the snowdrift.

He suddenly thought: in the past life, Wangyue had given him a powerful long blade, but in this life, the blade he saw was only a fake, and the real one that belonged to him had probably already been destroyed by Zhaixin Liu, before he could so much as even see it.

A short while passed, and his mind called up old memories unbidden.

That year, he had come to Jincheng Lake seeking a weapon.

Wangyue had emerged from the water, studied him with golden eyes that were gentle and friendly, and then said——

"The plum blossoms at the waist of the mountain are blooming beautifully, could you go get a branch for me?"

Mo Ran closed his eyes and raised an arm to cover them.

He didn't know about the events below the lake in the past life, and only thought that Wangyue's request was pointless pretentiousness.....

It was many days before they returned to Sisheng Peak.

Chu Wanning's shoulder was seriously injured, and the three youths were all exhausted, so they rested at Dai City for several days before returning.

Xue Meng said nothing of what happened to Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang; proud as he was, regardless of whether his parents were to react with disappointment or sympathy, to him, either would be salt on the wound. Chu Wanning noticed and his heart ached, and so he buried himself in ancient tomes and scrolls all day, looking for some other way of obtaining a holy weapon for Xue Meng, or else some means of allowing a mortal to rival a holy weapon in strength.

Apart from this, just who was that fake Gouchen, and where was his true self? And what was the meaning behind the last thing that "white chess piece" said before exploding?

There were many and more things to worry about; the candle in the library of the Red Lotus Pavilion burned all night as the water clock dripped away, scrolls scrawled with complicated writing littered the floor, and in the depths of the files was Chu Wanning's exhausted face.

"Yuheng, look at the state your shoulder is in, don't be so reckless." Xue Zhengyong, holding a warm cup of tea, was sitting next to him and chattering fussily, "Tanlang Elder is great at the healing arts, make some time and go have him take a look."

"No need, it's already started to heal."

Xue Zhengyong clicked his tongue: "That won't do, look at yourself, you've looked terrible ever since getting back. Nine out of ten people who've seen you say you look like you're just about to pass out. If you ask me, there's something strange about that wound, might be some kind of poison or something, it's better to be careful."

Chu Wanning glanced up: "I look like I'm about to pass out?" He paused and smiled coldly, "Who said that?"

Xue Zhengyong: "....."

"Aiya, Yuheng, can you not act like you're made of metal all the time, and everyone else is made of paper?"

Chu Wanning said: "I know my own limits."

Xue Zhengyong mumbled something inaudibly, very possibly "know your limits my ass" from the movement of his lips. Luckily Chu Wanning was too absorbed in his book to see.

They chatted for a while longer, until Xue Zhengyong saw that it was getting late, and got up to head back and keep his wifey company. Before leaving, he made sure to fuss some more: "Yuheng, don't stay up too late. Meng-er will die of guilt if he sees you like this."

Chu Wanning ignored him with gusto.

Being met with a frosty nail like this, Xue Zhengyong scratched his head awkwardly and left.

Chu Wanning drank some medicine and then returned to the table to continue his research until he started feeling a bit lightheaded. He propped his forehead in one hand, nauseous.

But the nausea faded in short order, so he chalked it up to being tired, and paid it no mind.

The night grew late, and, finally too woozy to continue, he fell asleep with his brows drawn tightly together, head pillowed on a sweeping sleeve next to the small mountain of tomes, an unfinished scroll still lying across his knees, the hem of his robes drooping to the floor like a water wave.

That night, he dreamt.

This dream, unlike others, was clear and distinct, almost real.

He was standing inside the Loyalty Hall of Sisheng Peak, but this Loyalty Hall was somewhat different from the one he knew, many furnishings and details had been altered. But before he had a chance to take a closer look, the gates swung open, setting crimson curtains adrift.

A person walked in.

"Shizun."

The person had a handsome face, deep black eyes with a tint of purple. He was a young man, but looked almost childlike when he curled the corners of his lips.

"Mo Ran?"

Chu Wanning stood up and was about to walk over, but found that his wrists and ankles were shackled by four lengths of metal chains flowing with spiritual power, fettering him in place and rendering him unable to move.

Shock followed by overflowing rage, Chu Wanning glared at the chains with disbelief, anger twisting his expression and choking his words back, and it was a while before he lifted his head to say harshly: "Mo Weiyu, what do you think you're doing? Untie me at once!"

But the person acted like he hadn't heard a word of his furious bellows, a lazy smile and a pair of dimples on his face as he strode over and gripped Chu Wanning by the jaw.

Author's Notes:

Bonus character card #3:

GoCheng the Exalted (the real one, not fake)

Courtesy Name: None

Nickname: Are you joking?

Job: Gatherer of the world's weapons, commander of battles, expert in the art of sword casting, protector of the righteous ways.

Simply put: Sharpening scissors~ sharpening knives~^[4]

Appearance in society: Lord of armed forces

Simply put: President of China's #1 weapon corporation

Likes: Poetry

Favorite food: Five grains of the agriculture god

Dislike: War

Dislike as well: Unemployment

Most painful thing: Unemployment from there being no wars

Height: God's height is heaven's secret, cannot be leaked

Ch.49 This Venerable One's Shizun Is Always So Mad

>>dubcon touching

Chu Wanning's incredulity was no longer describable in words. His eyes opened wide, staring at the Mo Ran in his dream as if looking at a ghost.

The grown-up Mo Weiyu was gallant, with broad shoulders and long legs, half a head taller than himself.

And when he looked down at him, there was musing and mocking in the corners of his eyes.

"This Venerable One's dear Shizun, you should really take a look in the mirror."

His finger slid along Chu Wanning's cheek to rest by his ear, eyes cold and threatening.

A moment passed in silence, then he let out a cold hmpf and leaned over abruptly, accompanied by a soft, scaldingly hot sensation as he captured Chu Wanning's lips in his own.

Caught completely off guard, Chu Wanning's head hummed with white noise, and something in his mind seems to have..... snapped.....

Mo Ran was kissing him. His breath invaded him, moist, agitated, full of filthy, sinful desire.

Lips met roughly with the scraping of teeth as stormy waves surged in his chest.

Chu Wanning was nearly trembling with fright, phoenix eyes wide open, mind equal parts furious and stupefied. But it was as if he had lost his spiritual powers in the dream, could hardly gather even his physical strength; he was held tightly against Mo Ran's chest, and couldn't struggle free of his grip at all.

The Mo Ran in the dream was completely different from the one he knew for some reason.

There was none of the deferential ingratiation, replaced instead by overbearing tyranny.

He could clearly feel Mo Ran's heated breaths, low and rapid, when he exhaled, the animalistic desire scalding like lava, threatening to melt him down flesh and bone alike.

Chu Wanning's face was pale with anger, nearly about to spit blood. He never could have imagined that he would get held down by Mo Ran without the strength to resist, and even harder to accept was the heat gathering in his abdomen and the weakness in his fingers from the wet, frantic friction of the kisses. He trembled in his arms; Mo Ran's chest was scalding hot, so hot that he might get melted and drowned even through the layers of fabric. He wanted desperately to struggle, but couldn't gather the strength.

By the time they parted, Chu Wanning's legs were boneless. Mo Ran, still holding him, turned to press his face against the back of his ear. He could feel the caress of warm, moist breaths at the base of his neck as he panted. Then he heard Mo Ran say: "Didn't you want to talk conditions with this Venerable One?"

His voice was hoarse, so much so that it sounded nearly unfamiliar to Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning looked down only to see the jut at his throat bobbing, a swallowing motion as he fought a losing battle to maintain control.

"But you have little else of value to this Venerable One, so you'll have to bargain with the last thing you have remaining."

Chu Wanning's voice grew hoarse as well, but he didn't know if it was from anger or desire; quietly, he said: "What thing....."

Mo Ran backed him into a wall, then abruptly raised a hand to strike the hard surface, the other hand closing tightly around Chu Wanning's shackled wrist.

Not without malicious spite, but also not without timid desire, he bent down to capture the lobe of an ear between his lips.

Chu Wanning shuddered violently, a frightening numbness shooting up his spine and spreading over his scalp.

Mo Ran's voice was husky, his breaths heavy and oppressive.
"Let me screw you, and I'll let you have your demand."

Chu Wanning's eyes shot wide open, wetness in his eyes colored with arousal, but even more with disbelief.

Mo Ran's hand had already felt its way to his waist, his lips moving against the side of his neck, venomous words spoken in the most tender voice.

"But this Venerable One loathes Shizun so very much, it'll probably be hard to summon any interest in Shizun's body. You'll have to work a little to make it a good time."

Mo Ran paused, but pulled him in even closer and continued stroking his waist.

"So really think it over, and if you're willing, then get on your knees like a good boy and put your mouth to work, serve me well, then go spread yourself on the bed and beg me to fuck you."

"....."

Chu Wanning was about to lose it.

The virtuous proud pure austere Yuheng Elder kept his distance from men and women alike and indulged in neither erotic art nor amorous song, ever incorruptibly chaste and aloof.

Or, in simpler words, he knew practically nothing in matters of love and lust.

And so, very unfortunately for him, in spite of his anger, all of his defenses fell apart in the face of this intense, unfamiliar feeling; he was utterly defeated.

Mo Ran waited for a short while, but received no reaction. He cursed under his breath and started kissing him again, unable to hold back. When he'd had his fill of his lips, he pulled his tongue out, trailing a thread of translucence, before immediately biting down none-too-gently on his neck, licking and kissing along his neck, shoulder, ear.

Chu Wanning's scalp grew numb still when Mo Ran began to pull and tear roughly at his robes, muttering "what're you pretending to be so virtuous and saintly for!" as he ripped, and when he lifted his eyes to look at him, his gaze was heated and crazed, a strange light in the corners of his eyes like long-accumulated hatred finally spilling out.

But also like the searing-hot lava of desire trapped under layers of rocks, finally overflowing after long years of restraint.

Chu Wanning, as if burned by the intensity of his predator-like gaze, wanted to look away, but Mo Ran saw through his thoughts and gripped his face before he could.

"Look at me."

His voice was rough and heated, shaking faintly from arousal—or perhaps something else—filled with the craving of a beast about to devour its prey.

"I said *look at me!*"

Chu Wanning closed his eyes shakily.

This dream was really far too absurd.....

"Shizun." The voice by his ear suddenly became soft and warm like the tone he was familiar with, "Shizun, wake up."

Chu Wanning blearily saw Mo Ran's face hovering mere inches from his own, and reacted immediately with a fierce and well-aimed slap that landed soundly on the other's cheek.

Mo Ran, caught off guard, ate the slap head on. He let out an "ah" and opened his eyes wide: "Shizun! What was that for?"

"....."

Chu Wanning sat up, phoenix eyes flickering with anger and alarm.

His body was still shaking slightly, dream and reality blending together and driving him mad.

"Shizun....."

"Stay away!"

Chu Wanning shouted harshly with his brows lowered in a scowl. Mo Ran was startled by the extreme reaction, and a while passed before he asked cautiously: "Did you have a nightmare?"

Nightmare.....

That's right, it was a dream..... it was just a dream.

Chu Wanning stared blankly at the person in front of him for quite a while before he was able to slowly collect the pieces of his composure.

He was lying in the library at the Red Lotus Pavilion. Loyalty Hall and the grown-up Mo Ran were nowhere to be seen. The only thing in front of him was a face that was still young and childlike.

Finally fully awake, Chu Wanning paused for a moment to school his expression into one of propriety as he made a show of rearranging his clothes with slender fingers that still trembled slightly, suppressing the agitation and unease that yet remained, and said: ".....Mn, I was dreaming and..... hitting someone."

Mo Ran rubbed the redness on his cheek and hissed a little in pain: "What was Shizun dreaming about? What a forceful hit....."

Embarrassment flashed across Chu Wanning's features. He pressed his lips together and, turning away a bit, loftily said nothing.

His face was as calm waters, but his heart was full of waves wildly crashing. He could practically feel his own pride on the very verge of shattering into a million tiny pieces: he couldn't believe that he would dream of something so unspeakably preposterous, of such filthy words, how absolutely shameless, how could he even call himself a teacher anymore.

Even worse, this useless body of his actually reacted to this humiliating dream, he really wanted to break down.....

Thankfully his robes were wide and loose-fitting, hiding his shame from the eyes of others.

But Chu Wanning's face still darkened gloomily as he propped up his forehead in one hand.

He couldn't grab the dream Mo Ran to vent his anger, but the one right in front of his eyes that conveniently delivered himself to his door was available. So, glowering, he asked sullenly: "What are you doing barging into my private quarters in the middle of the night like you own the Red Lotus Pavilion? Since when were you the Yuheng Elder?"

"....."

First a slap for no reason at all, then a thorough tongue lashing; Mo Ran felt a little wronged, mumbling in a tiny voice, "What's got you so mad this time....."

Chu Wanning scowled: "I'm not mad, I'm going back to sleep, get out!"

Mo Ran said: "But Shizun, it's already morning."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"I only dared to come into the Red Lotus Pavilion without permission to look for you because we've been waiting at the Platform of Sin and Virtue for quite a while already, but Shizun never came."

Chu Wanning: "....."

He opened a shuttered window, and sure enough, the sun had already risen a ways into the sky, the birds were singing and the bugs were buzzing.

Chu Wanning's scowl grew even darker.

He looked like he might summon Tianwen and start whipping at any second.

To have actually been immersed in a spring dream all the way through to early morning, and if not for Mo Ran coming to look for him, the dream might have even continued—the thought made the vein at Chu Wanning's temple throb, the joints of his fingers turning pale like jade where his grip tightened on the window frame.

Chu Wanning practiced mental cultivation, cultivating his mind with restraint and discipline, and was proficient in suppressing desires; he's never even had an unbecoming thought before this, much less a spring dream.

His principles being what they were, Chu Wanning was like a wooden man, stupid, clumsy, and stiff on top. His mental cultivation was so advanced as to

entirely sever all desire, and he often looked down in contempt at pairs of lovers and dual cultivation partners when he had nothing else to do, feeling quite self-satisfied that he was virtuous and incorruptible.

Who could've anticipated that he would fall like this in the end.....

In the hands of his own disciple.

The wise strong noble aloof Chu-zongshi dared not even look at Mo Ran as he angrily spat out: "Hurry and come with me to the Platform of Sin and Virtue for morning practice!" before turning and leaving abruptly, and was gone in an instant.

Xue Meng and Shi Mei had already been waiting for a long while, and were sitting in the shade of a tree chatting when Chu Wanning arrived.

Shi Mei was distraught: "Shizun is never late, did something happen? It's so late already and he's still nowhere to be seen."

Xue Meng was even more distressed: "Didn't Mo Ran go look for Shizun? It's already been a while and he's still not back, if I'd known this was gonna happen I would've gone with him. I hope Shizun's not sick?"

Shi Mei said: "Shizun's shoulder wound was quite severe, even with proper care, his body is frail by nature, so that's not unlikely....."

Hearing that, Xue Meng grew even more restless until he abruptly stood up: "I can't wait anymore, can't count on that unreliable mutt Mo Ran, I'm gonna go check on Shizun myself!"

But when he turned around, there Chu Wanning was, pristine robes fluttering as he strode over.

The pair beneath the tree called out simultaneously: "Shizun!"

Chu Wanning: "I got held up by something. I'll take you guys for martial practice today, let's go."

When Chu Wanning wasn't paying attention, Shi Mei turned to Mo Ran who was following behind him and asked in a low voice: "Is Shizun alright? What was the hold up?"

Mo Ran rolled his eyes: "He just overslept."

"Eh?"

"Shh, act like you don't know." Mo Ran rubbed his cheek, still sore from the slap earlier; he definitely didn't want an encore.

Shi Mei blinked: "Why's your left cheek so red?"

Mo Ran said quietly: "If you keep asking, my right cheek's gonna join it. Let it be, let's hurry and follow."

When they arrived at the practice field, Chu Wanning instructed Mo Ran and Shi Mei to go have a practice match first, keeping Xue Meng behind.

Chu Wanning said: "Sit."

Although Xue Meng didn't know the reason, he'd always obeyed Shizun's every word like the law, and promptly complied, sitting down on the spot.

Chu Wanning also sat down across from him, saying: "The Spiritual Mountain Competition is in three years, what are your plans?"

Xue Meng looked down, and a moment passed before he said through gritted teeth: "Win."

If Chu Wanning had asked him before their trip to Jincheng lake, Xue Meng would have answered proudly and with certainty.

But now, all that was left behind this word was a simple, stubborn refusal to give up his pride.

It wasn't that he had no self-awareness, but that he refused to just step aside and hand his title of "heaven's darling" over to someone else without a fight.

Having ground out the word "win", Xue Meng snuck a glance at Chu Wanning, his heart filled with anxiety.

Chu Wanning was looking at him without the slightest bit of derision or any doubt whatsoever.

He only said, simply:

"Good."

Xue Meng's eyes lit up immediately: "Shizun, do you think——do you think I can still..... I....." He stumbled over his words in his excitement.

Chu Wanning said: "My disciples don't give up before the fight."

"Shizun....."

"Outstanding youths from all sects participate in the Spiritual Mountain Competition. Those without holy weapons are naturally no match for you, but even if your opponent does have a holy weapon, there's no need to be afraid." Chu Wanning said, "A holy weapon is not something that can be easily mastered in a short period of time. Although your Longcheng blade is slightly lesser in comparison, it is still a superb, high-quality weapon of mortal craftsmanship. As long as you train and practice diligently in these three years, winning is certainly not outside the realm of possibilities."

It was well known that Chu-zongshi had a discerning eye and solid judgement in the realm of the martial arts.

Further, he wasn't the type of person to tell encouraging white lies out of sympathy, so Xue Meng's spirits were immensely lifted by his words.

"Shizun really means it?"

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes, saying lightly: "How old are you, Xue Meng? I don't coddle anyone older than five."

Xue Meng, a little embarrassed, rubbed his nose and started grinning.

Chu Wanning continued: "Victory or defeat is unpredictable, only pride cannot be taken lightly; just do your best and don't worry overmuch about the result."

Xue Meng answered: "I understand!"

Having eased Xue Meng's worries, Chu Wanning headed toward the practice field, arriving at the back where the training dummies were. In order to prevent disciples accidentally injuring people passing by while sparring with the dummies, this area was built out of the way, and one had to go through a long corridor and then turn a corner to get here.

Shi Mei and Mo Ran were conversing with their backs toward him, not too close and not too far away, just within hearing distance.

"You two....." Chu Wanning was just about to call them over, but seeing the sight before him, suddenly stopped talking.

Author's Notes:

Today's mini theater:

《If this is a modern danmei, then everybody's background could be...》

Chu Wanning: Probably the teacher with the worst temper in the entire school.

Shi Mei: Surgeon

Xue Meng: Film school student, studying... maybe performance major.

Xue Zhengyong: Oil executive, new rich tycoon.

Mrs Wang: A lady from a pristine family that married a new rich tycoon.

Mei Hanxue: Therapist

Ye Wangxi: Dedicated police officer

Mo Ran: ... Race car driver. Don't ask me why, driving cars^[5] all depend on him.

[1] The writing is actually 血滴漏 blood hourglass, but Mo Ran doesn't recognize the words, only parts of them, so he read it as 血古雨

[2] Double Eleven - Chinese black friday

[3] An excerpt from a poem; Jiangnan is a southern province that boasts of beautiful spring sights.

[4] 磨剪刀叻, 飽菜刀~ A rhyme sung by people who walk through neighbourhoods to provide knife sharpening services.

[5] 车 - Cars are a euphemism for porn in fandom culture.

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun
Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.50 This Venerable One Likes You

As someone who cherishes weapons, this kind of scene made Chu Wanning so angry he couldn't even speak.

He saw a moron.

Under the flowering tree not too far away, Mo Ran summoned Jiangui. The size of a holy weapon could be changed at will; most people liked to make their weapon bigger and more impressive-looking, or at least keep its normal size as Chu Wanning did. But Mo Ran had turned Jiangui tiny, about the length and width of a cord for tying hair, its leaves minuscule; the dignified holy weapon looked absolutely pitiful.

People had different spiritual energies; Tianwen glowed golden when Chu Wanning poured his spiritual energy in, but Jiangui glowed scarlet.

So, leaves aside, Jiangui looked just like a red string of fate.....

"Shi Mei, tie this on your hand, I want to see if Jiangui has the same power as Tianwen, to coax the truth out of people."

"Uh..... you want to test it out on me?"

Mo Ran smiled: "Yup, cause I'm the closest with you, and I know you'd never lie to me."

Shi Mei was still hesitant: "That's true, but....."

"Aiya, I won't ask anything tricky. If you don't believe me, let's pinky swear?"

He said, sticking out his pinky.

Shi Mei didn't know whether to laugh or cry: "How old are you already, isn't that a little too childish?"

"C'mon, let's pinky swear, if it's fine at eight then it's fine at eighteen, eighty-eight too, nothing childish about it." Mo Ran grabbed Shi Mei's right hand and pried his pinky out with a cheeky grin. Shi Mei, caught between getting mad and laughing at his antics, could only go along with it in the end.

But, unexpectedly, instead of hooking their pinkies together, Mo Ran grinned, eyes becoming little crescents: "Jiangui, time to get to work."

Jiangui zoomed faster than lightning, and in a flash had tied itself around Shi Mei's pinky, with its other end around Mo Ran's.

The handsome young man laughed like a sly fox that had schemed its way into ascension. He said happily, framed with dimples: "Congrats, you fell for it."

Shi Mei really didn't know whether to laugh or cry: "You!Hurry and let go."

"Later, later." Mo Ran grinned, "Just a couple of questions first."

Truth be told, Mo Ran had been feeling uneasy ever since that episode at Jincheng Lake, when he got Ever-Yearning and Shi Mei wasn't able to open the box.

Even though Shi Mei was wearing gloves at the time and didn't directly touch the box, Mo Ran just couldn't shake his doubts. What's more, it was Chu

Wanning who opened the box in the end.
Chu Wanning..... how was it possible.....

So Mo Ran decided that the box must have been broken.
But he wanted to use Jiangui to confirm it, just to make sure.

He was absolutely certain in his feelings for Shi Mei, but he worried that maybe he didn't have the same weight in Shi Mei's heart. As for that confession at Jincheng Lake, he couldn't be sure that he didn't imagine it.

Shi Mei had a gentle temperament and was nice to everyone. Unlike that Chu Wanning, with a sullen face day-in day-out like everyone else owed him something, totally unlikeable.

Taxian-Jun may be a crude person, but when it came to his heart's desire, he would dwell on it for so long that he tripped over his own thoughts.

"First off." Mo Ran's heart was filled with anxiety, but he kept grinning and feigning casualness. He decided to toss out a couple of easy, non-consequential questions first as padding.

"What do you think of Xue Meng?"

A prickling sting on his finger, and Shi Mei fessed up: "The young master is a good person, but he's too straightforward, sometimes intolerably tactless."

Mo Ran burst out laughing, clapping in glee: "Eh? Even you can get fed up with him? Hahaha, understandable, he's way too annoying."

Shi Mei turned red: ".....Don't be so loud, what if the young master hears."

"Ok ok ok." Mo Ran grinned, "But it makes me happy when you badmouth him."

Shi Mei: "....."

Mo Ran continued: "And what do you think of Shizun?"

"Shizun is good too, just his temper is a little....." Shi Mei seemed like he really didn't want to critique Chu Wanning, but he was bound by Jiangui, so he bit his lip for a while but still ended up having to say: "His temper is a little short."

"Haha, a little short? More like ridiculously short. Gets mad every other day and won't even admit to being mad, he's a bigger handful than the empress herself."

Chu Wanning, standing in the corner: "....."

Mo Ran wondered: "If you know about Shizun's bad temper, then why did you still pick him to study under?"

Shi Mei said: "Shizun is cold on the outside but actually kind on the inside. I'm not as naturally gifted as others, but he never minds if I'm slow on the uptake. He said everyone deserves to learn, and since I'm no good at combat, he taught me healing instead. H-he's truly very nice to me."

Mo Ran, originally quite gleeful, grew quiet upon hearing this, the grin disappearing off his face.

A while passed before he said: "When has he ever been nice to you. All he did was teach you some techniques, maybe occasionally take care of you, that's only to be expected from any master."

"That's different——"

Mo Ran grew annoyed, cheeks puffing out: "Anyway, he's not good to you! Whatever he does for you, I can do it too!"

Shi Mei stopped talking.

In the awkward silence that followed, Mo Ran slowly quelled the flames in his heart. Seeing Shi Mei looking wordlessly downward filled him with guilt, and he quietly whispered: "Sorry."

"It's alright." But a short moment later, Shi Mei suddenly said: "Once, some years ago, before you came to Sisheng Peak, I was walking along a path when it suddenly started storming."

"I wasn't a disciple under Shizun yet at the time. I bumped into him while running in the rain. He was holding a red oil paper umbrella, and, seeing my pitiful state, offered to share it with me. I had heard of his cold reputation, so I was very nervous walking by his side."

"And then?"

Shi Mei wore a soft expression: "Then? Then we didn't speak a single word the whole way."

Mo Ran nodded: "He's such a stuffy person, what is there even to say to him."

"Yes." Shi Mei smiled a little, "Shizun doesn't talk much. But, when he walked me to the door and I turned to thank him, I saw that his right shoulder was completely drenched. I was walking to his left, and didn't get rained on at all."

Mo Ran: "....."

"It was a small umbrella, really only big enough for one person, and he used most of it to cover me. I watched him walk away in the rain, and then, as soon as I got back to my room, I wrote a letter of intent asking him to accept me as disciple."

"That's enough." Mo Ran suddenly said, "You're way too soft hearted, if you keep going, I'll feel like you're too pitiful."

Shi Mei said softly: "A-Ran, don't you feel like Shizun is the one who's pitiful? He only has a small umbrella, because he's always alone, no one wants to walk with him. That's why, even if Shizun is a little strict with me sometimes, or scolds me a little much sometimes, I don't mind. Because I remember his drenched shoulder."

Mo Ran said nothing, the tip of his nose a little red, his heart a little forlorn. It was a hazy sort of forlorn feeling, and he wasn't even sure whom it was for.

"A-Ran, let me ask you something."

"Mn, go ahead."

"Do you dislike Shizun?"

Mo Ran paused: "I....."

"Or, in other words, you don't like him, right?"

For some reason, Shi Mei's usually gentle and serene gaze seemed somewhat sharp when he asked this. Mo Ran, caught off guard, found himself suddenly speechless.

In his daze, Mo Ran neither nodded nor shook his head. A long while passed before he forced a smile onto his face: "Aiya, aren't I supposed to be the one asking the questions here? Can't just let you turn it around on me like that!"

Shi Mei didn't miss the fact that Mo Ran just dodged the question, but he didn't force the issue, smiling: "I was just wondering, don't take it to heart."

"Mn." Mo Ran calmed his emotions and looked up through his lashes at Shi Mei's face, no less beautiful than the bright moon in the sky.

He had planned to ask Shi Mei if he liked himself for the third question, but the exchange just now left his heart heavy. Mo Ran was quiet for a bit, lips pressed together, before abruptly saying: "He's just my Shizun, nothing more than that. Liking or not is irrelevant."

Hearing these words where he stood in the shadows, Chu Wanning's eyelashes quivered slightly, like the wings of an injured butterfly.

Even though deep in his heart he already knew, to hear it confirmed like this still made his body feel so light it might float away, and his heart so heavy it might sink into the sea. Chu Wanning felt cold; maybe autumn had come early this year.

Mo Ran and Shi Mei were still talking in the distance. He closed his eyes, the light nausea that had been coming and going lately washing over him once again.

Suddenly feeling exhausted, he turned to leave.

But he had only taken a few steps when the autumn wind carried Mo Ran's voice faintly over. He stopped walking despite himself.

Mo Ran was asking Shi Mei his third question: "Well, you've given your thoughts on Xue Meng and Shizun, do me next."

He tried to sound as nonchalant as he could, and very carefully, almost pathetically asked:

"Shi Mei, what do you think about me?"

Shi Mei was quiet.

Jiangui indeed seemed to have the same interrogation ability as Tianwen. Shi Mei refused to answer, so Jiangui's scarlet radiance grew brighter where it was wound tightly around Shi Mei's finger.

Shi Mei frowned a little: "Ow....."

"Just say something." Mo Ran's heart ached for him, but this question had burrowed so deeply into his heart, this life and last, that it had practically become his personal demon, so he persisted, "What do you think of me?"

Shi Mei shook his head and closed his eyes, as if in a great deal of pain, long lashes trembling and sweat gathering on his forehead.

"....." Mo Ran sighed, unable to bear hurting him like this, "Forget it....."

He was just about to remove Jiangui when Shi Mei reached the limit of his endurance, and, face pale, said hoarsely: "I think you're.....great."

Mo Ran's eyes widened.

Shi Mei's face went from pale to red very quickly, as if vexed. He looked down, lashes lowered, and dared not look at Mo Ran.

Jiangui turned into specks of glimmering red light that fluttered like the petals of ravaged flowers back into Mo Ran's palm. With his head lowered, Mo Ran couldn't help letting out a quiet chuckle, and when he looked back up at Shi Mei, his face was warm like the first bloom of spring.

There was a lazy smile in his voice, but his eyes were a little wet as he said: "I'm glad, thank you. I think you're really great too. I already said it to you at Jincheng Lake, but since you don't remember any of it, I want to say it again. You're really.....really so likeable."

He didn't specify what kind of like, but Shi Mei still blushed all the way to his neck and couldn't find any words.

Mo Ran stared at him with deep inky eyes that shone with a clear, bright light, like an ocean filled with stars, like gentle waves in the night sky.

"I want to treat you right, I want to make you happy."

Shi Mei wasn't dense, and Mo Ran's meaning was written clearly all over his expression. Shi Mei couldn't help but lower his head.

Mo Ran's heart quivered, and he raised his hand to stroke Shi Mei's hair. But before he could even get close, there was a sudden flash of sharp golden light, and a lash of vine struck Mo Ran right on the face with an audible crack.

"Ah!" Feeling the sting, Mo Ran turned around in shock.

Chu Wanning stood in front of the walls, white with green eaves, pristine robes paler than snow and one hand held behind his back, staring coldly at them. Tianwen coiled on the ground like a hissing snake, willow leaves rustling, golden light coursing along its length with the occasional spark.

Shi Mei, startled: "Shizun....."

Mo Ran, holding his face: "Shizun."

So what if he was loathed, so what if he wasn't liked?

Another person might cry miserably, but Chu Wanning..... cry? Ridiculous. Of course he'd deliver a beating instead.

Chu Wanning's expression was frosty. He walked over slowly, voice frozen over: "Slacking off from training to chatter instead? Mo Weiyu, you think you're so impressive just because you got the last holy weapon? You think you're all-powerful and invincible now? Aren't you just so relaxed and carefree."

"Shizun, I was just....."

Chu Wanning glared. Mo Ran shut up.

"Shi Mingjing, spar with me. Mo Weiyu." He paused, then said resentfully, "Go practice. If you can't hold out for at least ten moves against me later, then go back and copy the book of meditation techniques three hundred times as punishment. Now get lost."

Ten moves?

He might as well just go and start copying.

Ch.51 This Venerable One's Shizun..... Pfft Hahaha

For the next three days, Chu Wanning was even more sullen than usual, his temper even worse.

Resentment was written clearly all over Yuheng Elder's features, and a haze of miasma followed wherever he went. The disciples scattered like prey animals at the mere sight of him. Even Xue Zhengyong dared not talk to him too much for fear of his murderous aura.

Chu Wanning didn't want to admit that he had any untoward feelings for Mo Ran, but seeing his two disciples rendezvousing by the training dummies and acting so affectionate, he simply couldn't help the rage that flared up and the sour feeling that flooded his chest.

He felt disgusted.

Not just at others, but more so at himself.

He and Mo Weiyu were master and disciple, nothing more. How was it any of his business whom Mo Ran liked to stick to, whom he wanted to be involved with?

What right did he have to wave his willow vine around just because he didn't like what he saw? If he liked someone, liked being near someone, what's that got to do with you? Did it inconvenience you in any way? Chu Wanning how are you this pathetically petty!

.....Anyway, backing up a thousand steps, so what if he felt unspeakable longing toward Mo Ran? He had his pride and plenty of self-restraint, more than enough to keep his feelings under control, more than enough to suppress that terrifying longing for however long it takes to suffocate it.

No one will ever know of this unsightly affection of his.

Nothing will remain but the brocade pouch with the two locks of hair inside.

Mo Ran won't know about his feelings, just like he will never know that, at the bottom of Jincheng Lake, the one who endured searing agony to save him wasn't Shi Mei, but himself.

But what is this feeling?
Is it.....jealousy?

The mere thought made Chu Wanning choke.

For months after that, he tried to avoid Mo Ran as much as possible, minimizing all interactions outside of the routine instructions in cultivation and training.

Time flew by, and it was nearly the end of the year before anyone knew it. One day, as Chu Wanning was returning from a trip down the mountain to suppress monsters, it started snowing just as he got to the front gates.

Sisheng Peak quickly became covered in a veil of silver. Chu Wanning was no good with the cold; tugging his robes closer for warmth, he walked briskly toward Loyalty Hall.

A hearty fire warmed the inside of the hall, firewood crackling inside the copper basin.

Chu Wanning came to report in with Xue Zhengyong, but the sect leader was nowhere to be seen. Instead, he bumped into Mo Ran.

There was no one else at Loyalty Hall. This was the first time Chu Wanning had been alone with him in many months, and he couldn't help feeling a little awkward. What's more, this was where that absurd dream took place.

Speaking of, Chu Wanning actually had that dream several more times afterwards, clear and vivid each time. He tried to struggle the first few times, but got used to it after a while and just let the Mo Ran in the dream run his mouth like a lunatic, while he idly counted Mo Ran's eyelashes out of pure boredom, one, two, three.....

But that dream always ended abruptly at a certain critical moment; after many repeats of the same, Chu-zongshi decided that it must be due to his innately pure and noble disposition, that even fantasies didn't get too overly sordid.

Having come to such a conclusion, Yuheng Elder and his fragile glass maiden heart finally managed to retrieve a bit of dignity.

But the combination of Mo Ran and Loyalty Hall still gave Chu Wanning an intuitive sense of danger.

Unfortunately, that young man hadn't the slightest about any of this. Seeing him, Mo Ran's face lit up in a toothy smile: "Shizun, you're back."

".....Mn."

"Are you looking for uncle? Aunt's feeling a little under the weather, so he's been over there taking care of her. What did you need? I'll let him know."

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together and said mildly: "No need."

Then immediately turned to leave.

But Mo Ran called out to him: "Shizun, please wait."

"What is it....."

He turned to look back as he spoke, but was unexpectedly met with Mo Ran's extended hand brushing against his brow.

Mo Ran brushed a few times, saying like it was the most natural thing in the world: "Look at you, you're covered in snow."

Chu Wanning froze.

At a loss for what to do, he stood frozen as the young man uttered fussily while dusting the snow off him, then took out a white handkerchief to dry his hair.

Chu Wanning was no good with the cold; he couldn't be exposed to the cold, or he'll easily fall sick.

But this person never knew to take care of himself. Last life, after he was imprisoned, he often liked to sit in the courtyard and watch the koi fish in the pond, unheeding even when it began to snow.

So he caught colds and ran fevers all the time. Shizun was even more frail after his spiritual core was destroyed; he would be bedridden for at least half a month every time he got sick, and bowl after bowl of medicinal decoction had practically no effect.

And so, when Mo Ran saw him covered in snow, half melted half frozen, he reflexively started brushing the snow off of him.

But halfway through drying his hair, he belatedly realized that his actions might have been a little too intimate. His head snapped up just in time to come face to face with a pair of reticent phoenix eyes.

Chu Wanning was glaring at him: "....."

Mo Ran's hands withdrew sheepishly: "Ahaha, this disciple overstepped his bounds, Shizun can dry himself off of course."

Chu Wanning was quite relieved that he backed off.

That dream was just a dream, after all.

His disciple was still the same as before, nothing like that guy in his dream who referred to himself as "this Venerable One".

Chu Wanning was silent for a while before taking the proffered handkerchief from Mo Ran. He took off his cape and walked over to the fire to warm his hands, then wiped off the melting snow on his hair.

"Since when did you finally learn what boundaries were?" Face lit by the warm light of the fire, he glanced sideways at Mo Ran through narrowed eyes: "Haven't you always been oblivious to such things?"

Mo Ran: "....."

Neither spoke for a moment. Chu Wanning finished drying his hair and absentmindedly tucked the handkerchief away, then shot an impassive glance at Mo Ran.

"Anyway, what are you doing here?"

Mo Ran hurriedly replied: "It's the end of the year, there's a year's worth of files that need to be organized, so I'm helping....."

Chu Wanning cut him off: "I know the files need to be organized, but isn't that Shi Mingjing's job? Why are you doing it?"

Mo Ran: ".....Shizun's memory is truly very impressive."

Chu Wanning was totally unmoved by the flattery: "Where is he?"

"He said he was a little feverish and headachey this morning." Seeing the look in Chu Wanning's eyes, Mo Ran hurriedly continued, "Sorry, Shizun, I was the one who told him to get some rest, so please don't blame him."

Such covering was like a sharp needle that pricked Chu Wanning and made his brows draw together. He was quiet for a while, then asked: "Is he okay?"

Seeing that he didn't lay blame, Mo Ran let out a breath of relief: "I gave him medicine and waited for him to fall asleep before leaving earlier. He just caught a cold, should be fine in two or three days. Thank you for the concern, Shizun."

"Who said I'm concerned about you lot, I was just asking."

Mo Ran: "....."

"I'll leave you to your organizing, then."
Chu Wanning left.

Sisheng Peak forbid its disciples from doing each other's duties. Mo Ran thought he was going to be punished by Shizun for sure, but Chu Wanning had unexpectedly let him off this easily. He stood in place dumbstruck for quite a while, and didn't react until Chu Wanning was already a distance away.

Mo Ran picked up the umbrella leaning against the door and ran after the lone figure in the snow.

"Shizun!"

"Shizun, wait!"

Chu Wanning turned around. Mo Ran came to a stop in front of him, shook the snow off the umbrella, and opened it above the two of them.

"The snow's really coming down, take the umbrella with you."

Chu Wanning shot a glance at him: "No need."

Mo Ran tried to hand the umbrella over, but Chu Wanning felt only irritation and refused to accept it. The umbrella fell in the back-and-forth struggle right as a wind picked up, and was blown several feet away.

Chu Wanning stared at that umbrella planted in the snow. He stared for a while. This was such a non-issue; he wanted to just turn and leave indifferently as he always had in the past. But his feet refused to move.

Just like how a candle will always go out in the end, and even an ancient well will dry up in time.

Even the most tolerant person will eventually break down.

Chu Wanning turned with a sweep of a sleeve and said angrily: "Mo Weiyu, can you just stop messing with me? I'm not Shi Mingjing, I don't need someone else to take care of me!"

A golden light gathered in his hand as he spoke, and Mo Ran reflexively took a step backwards, thinking he was going to summon Tianwen for a whipping again. But instead, the light rose into the sky like a gushing spring of gold and formed into a resplendent barrier, blocking snow and wind alike.

Mo Ran: "....."

Oh, a barrier for blocking rain and snow.....

Chu Wanning's expression was frigid, his brows even: "Do I look like I need an umbrella?"

He seemed to be truly angry, the barrier rapidly changing colors with the movement of his fingertips, from gold to red, to purple, blue, and then green.

The effect of the barrier changed with the color; one warded only against snow, one blocked the wind as well, and another even kept the inside of the barrier warm despite the freezing snowstorm.

These techniques were quite powerful, and Chu Wanning normally wouldn't waste his spiritual energy to block the snow this way. Such a sulkily showy display was so childish that Mo Ran was rendered completely speechless for a moment.

"Shizun, don't be angry....."

"Who said I'm angry?!" Chu Wanning's face was pale from anger, "Get lost already!"

"Ok ok ok, I'm getting lost." Mo Ran glanced at the barrier, "Don't waste your energy like that though....."

"Get! Lost!"

With a wave of Chu Wanning's hand, the spiritual energy forming the barrier suddenly gathered instead into a strike of lightning that landed right in front of Mo Ran.

Mo Ran was just showing him some concern out of the kindness of his heart but nearly got struck by lightning for it. He felt a bit resentful and was just about to say something, but when he looked up, he saw Chu Wanning standing in the snow, face pale to match, but the rims of his eyes were a little red.

Mo Ran, startled: "You....."

"You and I are merely master and disciple, nothing more than that. There's no need for any unnecessary concern between us. So take your umbrella and get lost."

Mo Ran started, understanding suddenly dawning on him.

"Shizun, that day at the practice field, when I was talking with Shi Mei, did you....."

Hear.

But Chu Wanning said nothing, only turned to leave.

Mo Ran didn't call out to him this time, and he didn't turn to look back.

A little ways away, Chu Wanning sneezed. His steps faltered, then he put his head down and walked even faster, as if he was angry, but also as if he was running away.

Mo Ran stood in the snow the entire time, staring numbly at his back until he disappeared, lost in thought.

Chu Wanning fell sick as soon as he got back to the Red Lotus Pavilion.

He could use barriers to ward off rain and snow, but he never bothered to when it came to himself, seeing it as a waste of spiritual energy. That's why,

when it rained, he just used an oil paper umbrella like any other ordinary person.

He sneezed a whole bunch, and the headache and fever were quick to follow as well. He was already used to self-medicating from all the times he got sick, and a little cold was nothing to even bat an eye at, so he took some medicine, washed up and changed his clothes, then burrowed into bed to sleep it off.

Maybe it was due to the cold, but the nausea that had been cropping up ever since he got injured at Jincheng Lake was especially acute this night. The night went by in a hazy sleep, his entire body drenched in a cold sweat but burning like a furnace.

Chu Wanning didn't wake up until noon the next day. Blinking his eyes blearily open, he laid there spacing out for a while before slowly getting out of bed to put on shoes.

He paused and stared.

His boots seemed to have become quite a bit bigger overnight.....

He looked more carefully.

Chu Wanning: “.....”

.....

Even Yuheng Elder's composure couldn't handle this kind of shock.

It wasn't that his boots had become bigger.

Chu Wanning stared blankly at his hands, his legs, his bare feet, and the shoulder that his robe had slid off from.

It was that he..... had become smaller????

Author's Notes:

Mini Theatre (this is an edit from an old joke~)

Xue Meng: Mutt I've got a quiz for you, what do you say when you see a frigid Shizun?

Mo Ran: Your Highness.

Xue Meng: What do you say when you see an angry Shizun?

Mo Ran: Your Majesty.

Xue Meng: What do you say when you see a Shizun that has shrunk in size?

Mo Ran: Come, Gege give you a smoochie (/^▽^)/ [1]

Xue Meng: Failed, get lost.

Ch.52 This Venerable One Didn't Even Get an Appearance

Xue Zhengyong was practicing his sword at the northern peak when a haitang blossom floated over. He uttered a curious "eh" and caught it while drying his sweat with a towel, muttering to himself: "Yuheng's messenger haitang? He can't even be bothered to come over to talk anymore? When did he get so lazy."

But he still took the golden orb of light from the flower's center and placed it in his ear.

Out came the unfamiliar voice of a child: "Sect Leader, please come to the Red Lotus Pavilion at your earliest convenience....."

Xue Zhengyong didn't believe it at first, but when he stepped off from his sword in front of Chu Wanning's residence, he was completely dumbfounded.

A child of about five or six years stood in the pavilion by the lotus pond stood with a hand held behind his back, gazing at the lotus with a face of gloom. Looking from the side, this person had a frosty expression and icy eyes to match; he was draped in Chu Wanning's robes, but they were really way too big on him, pooling on the ground, sleeve hem and all, looking like a fish towing behind it a huge sweeping tail.

Xue Zhengyong: "....."

The child turned around, 'if you laugh I will kill you and then myself' practically written on his face.

Xue Zhengyong: "**PFFT HAHAHAHAHAHA!!!**"

The child slapped the table angrily: "What're you laughing at! What's so funny!"

"I am definitely not lau——ahahaha oh god I can't, Yuheng, I told you to go to Tanlang Elder to get that wound checked out, but you just wouldn't listen, hahahaha, I can't breathe." Xue Zhengyong roared with laughter, holding his stomach with both hands, "I've, I've never seem a kid with such a murderous aura, ahahahaha."

This child was none other than the Chu Wanning who had awoken to find that he had shrunk. The vine that pierced his shoulder at Jincheng Lake must have been enchanted with some kind of curse that turns those stricken back into their five or six year old selves. Thankfully his spiritual power did not also revert, else Chu Wanning felt like he really might as well just die.

Xue Zhengyong went to fetch a set of small-sized uniform for younger disciples, laughing the whole way there and back.

Chu Wanning finally looked a little less comical after changing into the more fitting clothes. He straightened out the silver-trimmed blue hand guards, looked up to shoot Xue Zhengyong a glare, then said vehemently: "If you dare tell anyone, I will end you."

Xue Zhengyong laughed: "I won't, I won't. But what're you gonna do about this? I don't know anything about healing, so you gotta get someone to take a look right? How about I ask Tanlang Elder to come over....."

Chu Wanning swept his sleeves angrily, but the sleeves of the disciple uniforms were tight and form-fitting, waving them around didn't have the same effect at all. He grew even more grumpy: "Come over and do what, laugh at me?"

"Then how about I ask my wife to come take a look?"

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together and said nothing, looking indignant.

"I'll take that as a yes then?"

Chu Wanning only turned his back to him. Xue Zhengyong knew he was in a bad mood, but the sight was really too funny; he tried to hold back but ultimately failed, and once again burst into uproarious laughter.

Tianwen appeared with a woosh, Chu Wanning glaring at him out of the corner of his eye: "I dare you to laugh again!"

"Ok ok no more laughing. I'll go call my wifey over right away, ahahahaha."

Xue Zhengyong ran off and returned in no time with a worried Madam Wang in tow. Madam Wang froze as soon as she saw Chu Wanning, and a long while passed before she finally managed with disbelief: "Yuheng Elder....."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Thankfully, Madam Wang was a kind and compassionate doctor, unlike her husband. She asked Chu Wanning some questions while looking him over, then softly said:

"Elder's spiritual energy circulation is fine, and there's nothing abnormal about your body either. Nothing seems to have changed aside from having turned into a child."

Chu Wanning asked: "Does the Madam know of a way to break the curse?"

Madam Wang shook her head: "Elder's injury was caused by an ancient willow vine, I'm afraid there is no other known case of this ailment, so I do not know how to treat it."

Chu Wanning lowered his lashes, stunned, and was speechless for a while.

Madam Wang couldn't bear the sight, and hurriedly said: "Yuheng Elder, based on what I have seen, the most likely cause of your current state is that the willow vines likely contained a self-healing secretion that got into your wound, and not actually a curse, else it wouldn't have taken this long to take effect. It was probably only a very slight amount of the secretion, and was only able to affect your body because you were overworking yourself day after day. How about you take care and rest up for a few days, and see if anything changes?"

Chu Wanning was silent for a while, then sighed: "There's nothing else for it. Many thanks, Madam."

"You're welcome."

Madam Wang gave him another careful once-over: "With the Elder's current appearance, as long as you don't tell them, no one will be able to tell it's you."

She wasn't wrong; even Chu Wanning himself had forgotten what he was like at five or six. Looking at his reflection in the pond, other than some vague similarities in facial features, he didn't look very much like his grown-up self at all. Finally feeling slightly relieved, he looked up at Xue Zhengyong to say:

"Sect Leader, I'm going to go into seclusion at the Red Lotus Pavilion for a few days. Please look after my disciples."

"That's a matter of course, Xue-er is my son, Ran-er is my nephew, and Shi Mei is a disciple of Sisheng Peak, of course I'll look after them." Xue Zhengyong grinned, "You just worry about yourself."

But three days of meditation later and there still wasn't even the slightest sign of his body going back to normal. Chu Wanning couldn't help feeling even more anxious, totally unable to "take care and rest up" as directed by Madam Wang.

One evening, Chu Wanning finally couldn't handle the restless feeling any longer. Meditation wasn't doing anything anyway, might as well go take a stroll down the mountain, get some things off his mind.

It was after dinner and before evening classes, and Sisheng Peak's paths and corridors were full of disciples, but no one really paid him any mind. Chu Wanning strolled around for a bit, then went to the bamboo forest near the Platform of Sin and Virtue.

The Elders each had their own favored practice area that they always took their disciples to for cultivation and training. This bamboo forest was Chu Wanning's.

The tranquil rustling of bamboo leaves filled the air. Chu Wanning plucked a leaf and idly blew a melody with it, the crisp, serene notes soothing his agitated mind. But it wasn't long before the sound of footsteps approached and stopped near him.

"Oi, kiddo."

Chu Wanning opened his eyes.

It was Xue Meng, long-legged and slim-waisted, standing proudly amidst the bamboo forest, blade LongCheng glistening in hand as he declared towards him.

"I'm going to practice sword here, go blow your leaf elsewhere."

"....." The end of Chu Wanning's eyebrow went up a bit. It was quite a strange feeling to have Xue Meng boss him around like this. He thought for a moment, then said: "I'll play my leaf, you can practice your sword, there's no interference."

Xue Meng said: "No way. Hurry and leave, my blade will hurt you."

"You can't hurt me."

Xue Meng clicked his tongue, patience running thin: "Don't say I didn't warn you then. If you get injured later, it's none of my business." He said, LongCheng unsheathing with a powerful sound, like the hiss of a serpent emerging from the depths of a lagoon and soaring into the skies.

Instantly, LongCheng became a dancing shadow in Xue Meng's hand amidst the flying leaves, a brilliant trail in its wake as light reflected off the blade. One slice rendered a leaf into ten pieces, the force of it plucking more leaves from the bamboos. Pierce, thrust, swipe, and slash, every motion smooth as the glide of snow in wind.

Even a fifty year old cultivator would praise such an impressive display, not to mention a five year old child.

But even when Xue Meng had gone through ten forms, the child was still just sitting on his rock playing his leaf, as if there was nothing astounding or even noteworthy happening in front of him.

Xue Meng, irritated, sheathed his blade and leaped down from the upper regions of the bamboo forest, landing lightly before Chu Wanning.

"Kid."

"....."

"Hey, kid, I'm talking to you."

Chu Wanning lowered the leaf and slowly opened his eyes to look expressionlessly at him: "What is it? Did your master not teach you to be courteous when speaking to others? Don't just go hey this hey that, I have a name."

"Why would I care to know your name." Xue Meng was going to be nice about it, but the rest of his good humor vanished after those thorny words, "Blades don't have eyes, scram off to the side before mine cuts your head off."

Chu Wanning replied with an air of indifference: "If you can't even avoid my head, is there even any point to you practicing the blade?"

"You!" Xue Meng had never been thus disputed in all his life, and by a beginner disciple who doesn't even reach up to his thigh, at that. Angry and indignant, he said, "You sure are impudent, do you even know who I am?"

Chu Wanning glanced at him mildly: "Who are you?"

".....I am the young master of Sisheng Peak." Xue Meng was about to suffocate from indignation, "How do you not even know this?"

The corners of Chu Wanning's lips quirked up slightly. The smile would have looked very mocking on his original face, but on his current childish, adorable face, was even more infinitely mocking.

"You're just the young master, it's not like you're the sect master, why would I know of you?"

"Wh, wh-wh-wh-what did you say?"

"Quit putting on airs and practice your sword."

Chu Wanning lowered his long lashes and went back to playing his leaf, the melody floating leisurely in the wind, notes rising and falling.

Xue Meng could seriously die from how mad he was; he let out a yell and actually got into it with a little kid. But no matter how mad he was, he still didn't want to hit a kid, so he could only leap up and hack ruthlessly away at the bamboos, which broke and fell in batches amidst the serene melody.

His blade was swift and vicious; several flashes, and dozens of bamboos had been carved into blunt points. Against an enemy, the points would've been razor-sharp, but this was enough for teaching a junior disciple a lesson.

Hundreds of pointed bamboo sticks fell directly toward Chu Wanning, and were mere inches from hurting him. Xue Meng rushed downwards to move this cheeky little disciple out of the way.

He didn't actually want to hurt the kid, just to scare him a bit. But unexpectedly, in the same instant he rushed down, the child stopped playing and flicked the leaf between his fingertips, the tender bamboo leaf suddenly turning into hundreds of fine threads.

Instantaneously, the hundreds of threads struck out toward the falling spikes with stunning precision.

Even the wind seemed to stop flowing.

Chu Wanning stood up. Simultaneously, the hundreds of spikes all around him became mere powder.

Utterly obliterated!

Xue Meng stood frozen in shock, face both pale and red, unable to manage even half a word.

The little kid before his eyes looked up, silver-blue uniform fluttering, and grinned at Xue Meng: "You wanna go again?"

Xue Meng: "....."

"Your strikes are vigorous but without order. Too erratic and unsteady."

Xue Meng opened his mouth, then closed it.

Chu Wanning continued: "Start over from the sparrow form. Follow my music, go through each form in time with the segments of the tune and no faster than that."

To be instructed like this by a little kid, Xue Meng's face became even more overcast, biting his lip and not moving at all. Chu Wanning didn't rush him, waiting quietly to see if Xue Meng would lay down his ego for the sake of improvement, if he would be willing to listen to a half-grown child.

A while passed before Xue Meng suddenly stomped his feet in dejection, flung his sword, and turned to leave.

Watching him leave in a fit, Chu Wanning's expression darkened a little, thinking that it was truly such a pity that Xue Meng couldn't humble himself to accept guidance.....

But before he could even finish that train of thought, he saw Xue Meng pick up a branch from the ground and turn around to say huffily: "Then, then I'll use a branch, just in case I hit you."

Chu Wanning paused, then he nodded with a smile: "Alright."

Xue Meng plucked a bamboo leaf for him and wiped it clean before handing it over: "Here, xiao didi^[2], for you."

So he's "xiao didi" now, instead of "kiddo"?

Chu Wanning threw an amused glance at him, accepted the leaf, and, sitting back down on the rock, leisurely started playing again. Xue Meng had a rash personality; this maneuver includes a move where the wielder leaps and turns in mid-air while unleashing six stabs followed by a strike. But Xue Meng never could get it quite right, often stabbing over a dozen times before the strike, which far misses the optimum window.

Xue Meng messed it up five, six times in a row, his brows drawing increasingly tighter as he grew more and more agitated.

In his agitation, he caught a glimpse of the child sitting on the rock playing the bamboo leaf; despite his tender years, he was the very image of composure, without even the slightest bit of complaint, and Xue Meng couldn't help the sense of shame that crept up.

So he rallied his spirits and tried several more times, slowly getting a feel for it in the melody's rhythm. But he didn't get ahead of himself, keeping at it until late night, when the moon was hanging high in the sky, and he could finally complete the maneuver flawlessly.

Xue Meng wiped at the sweat on his brows, exclaiming happily: "Today was all thanks to you. Which Elder's disciple are you, lil bro? You're pretty amazing, how did I not know about you before?"

Chu Wanning was already prepared for the question——Xuanji Elder had many disciples, so many that he couldn't even remember them all. He put the leaf away and said with a small smile: "I am Xuanji Elder's disciple."

Xue Meng seemed to think rather little of Xuanji. He hmph'd: "Oh, the Rubbish King huh."

"Rubbish King?"

"Ah, pardon me." Xue Meng misunderstood the surprise in Chu Wanning's eyes, and thought the child was upset that he had derided his shizun.

He smiled and explained: "It's just a nickname. Your shizun accepts anyone and everyone; the rubbish part refers those disciples of his that are completely talentless, not Xuanji Elder himself, don't mind it, lil bro."

Chu Wanning: ".....Do you guys often give the elders nicknames in private?"

Author's Notes:

Xue Meng: I met this child today, pretty impressive, but something felt wrong.

Xue Zhengyong: (Nervous) What felt wrong?

Xue Meng: His expressions towards me felt wrong.

Xue Zhengyong: ... Maybe you provoked him... it's normal that he noticed you...

Xue Meng (Angry table flip): No! There is no admiration in his eyes! Do you know how it feels when a kid not even one meter tall look down upon you?

Xue Zhengyong:

Ch.53 This Venerable One's Cousin is Certainly Not Very Smart

"Well of course, they all get nicknames, no one gets a pass." Xue Meng appeared to be in quite the good mood, eager to show Chu Wanning the ropes, "You look pretty young; what are you, five? You must be new to Sisheng Peak then, haven't gotten to know everyone yet. Once you've settled in, you'll find out that the disciples have nicknames for all twenty of the elders."

"Oh." Chu Wanning shot him an undecipherable look. "For example?"

"Oh man, where do I even start. But it's getting late now and I'm kinda hungry. As thanks for all the pointers you gave me today, I'll take you for a late-night snack down the mountain and tell you over food."

Chu Wanning thought for a moment with his head lowered, then smiled and said: "Mn, okay."

Xue Meng put away LongCheng and took Chu Wanning's hand, the unknowing disciple and the downsized master walking along the stone steps between the bamboo grove toward the main gate.

"Little bro, what're you called?" Xue Meng asked as they walked.

Chu Wanning answered calmly: "My surname is Xia."

"Xia what?"

"Xia Sini." [sounds like 'scare you to death']

Xue Meng completely failed to catch on, even happily asking: "That's a nice name. Written with which letters?"

Chu Wanning glanced at him sideways with a look reserved for idiots: ".....Si as in Disciple Si, Ni as in Disciple Ni^[3]. Xia Sini."

"Oooh." Xue Meng, still grinning, kept asking, "And how old are you? Was I right before or what, you can't be older than five?"

“.....” Chu Wanning’s entire face was dark. Luckily for Xue Meng, he was looking at the road and not his face, or he’d definitely have gotten the scare of his life. “No, the young master guessed wrong. I’m six this year.”

Xue Meng: “Then you’re amazingly talented, but not quite as much as I was at your age of course. Anyway, with a bit of guidance, you’ll definitely grow up to be outstanding. Say, why don’t you quit being Xuanji’s disciple? Call me shige, and I’ll go ask my Shizun to take you on as a disciple, how about that?”

Chu Wanning managed, with effort, to not roll his eyes: “What did you say for me to call you?”

“Shige.” Xue Meng, still grinning, bent down and flicked Chu Wanning’s forehead, “This is a rare opportunity you know.”

Chu Wanning’s expression was complicated: “.....”

“What, speechless from overwhelming joy?”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

The two laughed and chattered as they walked——at least, Xue Meng thought they were laughing and chattering——when a voice suddenly came from behind them and ended this line of conversation that might have led to Xue Meng’s untimely demise.

“Eh? MengMeng, what are you doing here?”

On the entire Sisheng Peak, to have the nerve to call Xue Meng MengMeng^[4], who else could it be? Xue Meng started cursing before he was even done turning his head.

“Mo Ran you god damn mutt, call me that one more time and I’ll rip out your dog tongue.”

Sure enough, Mo Ran stood behind them under the clear moonlight, clothes fluttering in the breeze and an easy grin on his face. He was just about to throw a retort to tease Xue Meng some more when he noticed the dainty kid next to him and screeched to a halt: “This is.....”

Xue Meng pulled Chu Wanning behind him, glowering at Mo Ran: “None of your business.”

“Nonono, don’t hide him away.” Mo Ran circled around and grabbed Xue Meng’s hand, pulling Chu Wanning back out and crouching down to give him a careful once-over. He made a questioning noise, muttering, “This kid looks awfully familiar.”

Chu Wanning, inwardly alarmed: “.....”

“Feels like I’ve seen you somewhere before.”

Chu Wanning didn’t like where this was going; if he got busted here, how would he ever face anyone ever again? He took a subconscious step back and turned to run.

“Hold it!” Mo Ran grabbed him with a mischievous grin, then reached out and playfully swiped his nose and said in a soft voice, “Come, little didi, tell gege your name?”

The nose that just got swiped felt oily; awkward and self-conscious, Chu Wanning kept trying to back away.

Mo Ran thought he was scared, and laughed as he said, “What’re you hiding for, be good and tell gege, is your name Xue?”

Xue Meng: "???"

Mo Ran pointed at Xue Meng and asked, smiling, "Is he your papa? Tell the truth, this gege will buy you candy."

"What's your problem Mo Weiyu!!" Xue Meng exploded, face bright red feathers all ruffled, "Wh-wh-wh-what the hell are you thinking?! Y-you're despicable! F-f-filthy! Sh-shameless!"

Chu Wanning was also speechless for a while, but secretly felt somewhat relieved: ".....My surname is Xia, Xuanji Elder's disciple, Xia Sini."

"Scare you to death?" Mo Ran caught the meaning immediately and his eyes curved into slivers of amusement, "Haha, how interesting."

"....."

"Seriously, what's wrong with you!" Xue Meng shoved Mo Ran away and said angrily, "He's my new friend, butt out already. We're going for a late night snack, out of the way."

"Okay." Mo Ran moved out of the way, but then fell into step next to them, grinning and swaggering.

Xue Meng roared at him: "What do you think you're doing?"

"I want a bite to eat too." Mo Ran said innocently, "What, am I not allowed?"

Xue Meng: "....."

Wuchang Town.

This small town had once been infested with all manners of ghosts and ghouls, but thanks to the founding of Sisheng Peak nearby, it gradually regained its peace over the years, and could even be called lively these days.

It was late enough that the night market was already open. The group walked past the many stalls on the sides of the road and picked a gudong soup [hotpot/shabu-shabu] place, taking their seat at a low wooden table in the outdoor area.

"Gudong soup" uses a pot propped over a stove, with the fire burning while eating. The broth is generally very spicy; fresh, raw ingredients are placed on the table and dipped into the boiling broth to be cooked at the time of eating. It was called gudong soup because of the 'gudong' sound of food being tossed into the broth.

This was a famed dish of the ChuanShu province, but Chu Wanning only ate it with clear broth free of peppers; anything spicy made him choke.

Xue Meng was born here, and Mo Ran had grown up around XiangTan; both of them were used to spicy food, and naturally assumed that 'Xia Sini' could also handle it.

When they sat down to order, Xue Meng called out a bunch of dishes with familiarity, and added: "With extra peppers and chili oil in the broth."

But Chu Wanning suddenly tugged on his sleeve and said quietly: "I want a twin pot."

"Wha?" Xue Meng thought he had misheard.

Chu Wanning's expression was dark: "Twin pot, half spicy half mild."

Xue Meng: ".....You aren't from here?"

"Mn."

"Ah." Xue Meng nodded in understanding, but there was surprise in his eyes as he glanced at Chu Wanning, "To have left your home at such a young age, it's really so..... *sigh*, nevermind." He sighed and turned to the waiter, "Alright, twin pot then."

But there seemed to be a hint of resistance in Xue Meng's tone.

Soon enough, he found that he indeed was not imagining things, that Xue Meng really was reluctant to just accept it, fussing incessantly as they waited for their food: "Shidi, when in ChuanShu, do as the ChuanShu people do——you *gotta* learn to eat spicy foods. How're you gonna get buddy buddy with people when you go out if you don't eat spicy? You don't have to know the local dialect, but spicy food is non-negotiable. Oh yeah, where are you from, anyway?"

Chu Wanning: "LinAn."

"Oh." Xue Meng mulled it over, but knew little and less of that southern region, so he asked while nibbling on the tips of his chopsticks: "Do you guys eat rabbit heads over there?"

Before Chu Wanning could even respond, Mo Ran had already piped up from the side with a smile: "Of course not."

Xue Meng shot him a glare, and Chu Wanning also looked over at him.

Mo Ran had a foot up on the wooden bench and an arm propped casually on his knee as he skillfully twirled the chopsticks in his hand. Seeing their reactions, he grinned and tilted his head: "What? Why the look, they really don't eat that."

Xue Meng turned to ask Chu Wanning: "Is that true?"

"Mhm."

Xue Meng went back to glaring at Mo Ran: "How did you know that? You been there?"

"Nope." Mo Ran pulled a funny face, "But Xia-xiong and our Shizun are from the same place, don't you even know that Shizun doesn't eat rabbit head? When he picks cold dishes at Mengpo Hall, it's either tofu with scallion or sweet osmanthus lotus root, look for yourself next time if you don't believe me."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"Ah, I guess I never really paid attention before. I haven't had the guts to look at what's in Shizun's plate ever since that one time I saw his breakfast, too scary." Xue Meng rubbed his chin and let the distaste show on his face, "Shizun's tastes are really beyond words. Did you know? He actually eats *savoury* tofu pudding."

Chu Wanning: "....."

As he spoke, Xue Meng actually turned toward him and said, sincerely and with the utmost importance: "Little shidi, definitely, absolutely, do *not* take after Yuheng Elder, or no one will want to eat with you. Remember, rabbit head and spicy foods are both *mandatory*, and when you have tofu pudding for breakfast, do *not* eat it with *savoury* sauce."

"Don't forget about the seaweed and dried shrimp." Mo Ran added.

"Right, seaweed and dried shrimp too." It was a rare instance of Xue Meng and Mo Ran uniting against a common enemy. "Absolutely unacceptable."

Chu Wanning looked at the pair of idiots, face devoid of expression: "Oh."

Their dishes came in short order: fresh and crispy bamboo shoots, vividly green cabbage, tender tofu, succulent fillets of fish, thinly sliced rolls of lamb neatly piled on a porcelain plate, meat fried to a crunchy gold and sprinkled with cumin and pepper flakes, and a jar of freshly made soy milk on the side, the little table creaking under the weight.

Food brings people together, especially a lively meal like gudong soup; a couple plates of lamb and a few cups of soy milk later, even Xue Meng and Mo Ran's strained relationship became more relaxed in the thick steam, at least for the time being.

Xue Meng scoured the spicy broth with his chopsticks: "Oi oi, where's the brain I put in here?"

"Isn't it attached to your neck?" Mo Ran laughed.

"I meant the pig brain!"

Mo Ran bit his chopstick with an impish grin: "Mhm, that's the one."

"You god damn mutt dare insult me——"

"Oh hey! Your brain floated up! Time to eat!"

Xue Meng walked right into his trap in a moment of excitement, yelling: "Put your dog paw away! Don't even think about stealing it, that's my brain!"

Chu Wanning sat on his little stool, leisurely drinking his jar of sweet soy milk while watching the brats bicker. He was in no hurry; the entire mild side of the pot was all his.

He finished the soy milk and licked his lips as if wanting more. Mo Ran saw and asked with a smile: "Does little shidi like it?"

Chu Wanning took a moment to digest the fact that he was just called 'little shidi' and internally calculated the possibility of making him not do that, only to arrive at the conclusion that his chances are practically zero, so he could only reply dryly: "Mn, it's not bad."

So Mo Ran turned toward the waiter: "Excuse me, another jar of soy milk for my shidi here."

And so Chu Wanning contently began drinking a second jar.

He had always loved sweets, but he got a cavity from eating too many pastries before, and Tanlang Elder had to go to quite the trouble to restore it for him. Since then, Chu Wanning has refrained from overindulging in sweets for the sake of his thin face.

Being stuck as a kid had the unexpected benefit of letting him eat all the sweets he wanted.

Mo Ran watched him eat with his cheek propped in a hand: "Your tastes are just like Shizun's."

Chu Wanning choked a little but managed to maintain his placid expression: ".....Is shixiong talking about Yuheng Elder?"

"Yup." Mo Ran nodded with a smile as he pushed a steamer basket toward Chu Wanning, "Try this. I think you'll like it too."

Chu Wanning picked up a leaf-wrapped steamed bun from the bamboo steamer and took a small bite; warm steam gushed out from the bun, and inside

the soft, glutinous wrapper was a sweet bean paste filling.

“Do you like it?”

Chu Wanning took another bite before nodding: “Mn.”

Mo Ran smiled: “Then have some more.”

The three of them chatted while eating. Chu Wanning suddenly remembered the earlier subject, and, after finishing his fourth bun, asked Xue Meng with feigned nonchalance: “By the way, young master, you mentioned earlier that every elder has a nickname. If my Shizun Xuanji Elder is called the Rubbish King, then what’s Yuheng Elder’s nickname?”

Author’s Notes:

The yin yang pot thing comes from that joke “How to tell when a Sichuanese person is utterly disappointed in you”, the following is abridged with the characters from this novel.

How to tell when the young master of Sisheng peak is utterly disappointed in you?

Xue Ziming: Okay, yin yang pot then yin yang pot it is.

How to tell when elder Yuheng is utterly disappointed in you?

Chu Wanning: Sure, no sugar then no sugar it is.

How to tell when the little handsome Shi-Ge from Sisheng Peak is utterly disappointed in you?

Shi Mingjing: Aye...okay, looks feminine then looks feminine it is.

How to tell when LinYi Rufeng Sect’s Ye Gong-Zi is utterly disappointed in you?

Ye Wangxi: Unseen then unseen it is.

How to tell when Kunlun Taxue Palace Elder Shixiong is utterly disappointed in you?

Mei Hanxue: Heh heh, like above then like above it is.

How to tell when this novel’s main character is utterly disappointed in you?

Mo Weiyu: Hmph! Big scumbag then big scumbag it is.

Meatbun: ... Hang on, looks like someone from above is giving up?

Ch.54 This Venerable One Fights Over Pastries

“Shizun?” Xue Meng’s expression became serious for a few seconds, “He’s the only one who doesn’t have any nicknames out of everybody on Sisheng Peak. Nobody dares to joke about him.”

“Bullshit, everyone knows that you like Shizun, so they just all hold their tongues around you.” Mo Ran rolled his eyes, pulled Chu Wanning over, and whispered to him loudly, “Don’t listen to him, I’ll tell you—out of everyone on Sisheng Peak, Yuheng Elder is the one with the most nicknames.”

“Oh? Really?” Chu Wanning lifted his eyebrows slightly, showing the slightest bit of interest. “For example?”

“For example, one of the more courteous ones would be white-clothed ghost.”^[5]

“.....Why do they call him that?”

“Because he only wears white clothes every single day.”

“.....What else is there?”

“Little napa cabbage.”

“.....Why is that?”

“Because he only wears white clothes every single day.”

“.....What else?”

“Big mantou.”

“Why?”

“Because he only wears white clothes every single day.”

“What else is there?”

“Little widow.”

Chu Wanning: “????”

“Do you know why they call him that?” Mo Ran was still laughing stupidly, totally unaware of the flicker of killing intent that flashed in Chu Wanning’s eyes, “It’s because he only wears white clothes every single day.”

“.....”

If Chu Wanning’s temper hadn’t been so good, he wouldn’t have been able to retain his composure: “What, what else is there?”

“Aiyo.” Mo Ran glanced at Xue Meng’s expression, and whispered softly in a voice that wasn’t subtle at all, “If I say any more, I’m afraid that my cousin here might pour the entire hotpot over my head.”

Xue Meng slapped the table, gnashing his teeth angrily: “That’s ridiculous! Who allowed them to make fun of Shizun like that? What sort of little napa cabbage or big mantou, not to mention little widow? Are they sick of being alive?”

“Ah.” Mo Ran replied, simmering with laughter, “I can’t believe you’re already so upset because of these nicknames. You haven’t even heard what the female disciples call Shizun, it’ll give you goosebumps.”

Xue Meng’s eyes widened: “What do they call him?”

Mo Ran drawled lazily: “What else could they call him, they’re girls after all—bound to be more refined. Something something like pear blossoms under the pale moon, the spring snows, Sir Chu of Lin An, lotus blossom beauty. My god.”^[6]

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Xue Meng: “.....”

“These nicknames are still fine. In comparison, someone like Tanlang Elder with such a terrible temper and average looks has much worse ones.”

Out of all of the twenty elders on Sisheng Peak, the one that Chu Wanning had the worst relationship with was Tanlang Elder. Chu Wanning asked: “What do they call him?”

"Something like wintertime pickles or mustard greens, because his skin is dark." Mo Ran said, laughing. "MengMeng, don't make that face at me, you have your fair share of nicknames too."

Xue Meng looked like he'd just swallowed a whole egg: "What? Me too?"

"Of course." Mo Ran said, grinning.

Xue Meng tried to look like he didn't mind, and cleared his throat, asking: "Well, what do they call me?"

"Fanny."

".....why?"

"What do you mean why, isn't it obvious?" Mo Ran shrugged his shoulders, uttering those words mirthfully, but couldn't resist anymore, and slapped the table, laughing. "You're like a peacock fanning its tail feathers everywhere, HAHAHAHAHA—"

Xue Meng bounded to his feet, howling in anger: "MO RAN! I'LL KILL YOU!!!!!!!"

By the time the three of them had eaten their fill and drank enough, it was already past midnight. They returned to Sisheng Peak, and Chu Wanning was first sent off by the two stupid disciples to Xuanji Elder's quarters. He bade them farewell. Xue Meng eagerly made plans to meet tomorrow near the bamboo forest, but Chu Wanning didn't know when he might turn back to his original form, and didn't dare to agree. Instead, he said that he'd come meet Xue Meng if he had free time.

Chu Wanning waited until the two disciples had walked far away, and only then did he fly up lightly, stepping along the edges of rooftiles and making his way back towards Red Lotus Pavilion.

The second morning, Chu Wanning woke up, and felt slightly dispirited after seeing that he was still stuck in a child's body.

Chu Wanning stayed stone-faced, stepping onto a wooden stool, and stared at the person in the mirror for a long while. He felt as though he didn't have the motivation to comb his hair properly. After mulling things over, he felt like he couldn't take it anymore, and immediately went to find Xue Zhengyong.

"What? You saw Meng-er and Ran-er yesterday?"

"Right, I said that I was Xuanji Elder's disciple, and they didn't seem to doubt it." Chu Wanning said, "But if Xue Meng comes to ask you, please remember to cover for me. But more importantly, I've already cultivated for more than ten days, and nothing has really changed. This isn't working, I'll have to ask Tanlang to take a look after all."

"Oho, our Yuheng Elder and his thin face is suddenly not worried about losing face?"

Chu Wanning shot him a cold glance. However, such a look coming from a young child wasn't imposing at all, but rather looked like the child was throwing a fit.

Chu Wanning was quite adorable as a child, and Xue Zhengyong couldn't help but to be slightly moved, reaching out to pat his head.

Chu Wanning suddenly said: "Sect Leader, when my body returns to normal, could you ask HuanSha Hall to tailor me a new set of Sisheng Peak robes? Not white."

Xue Zhengyong froze in shock: "I thought you didn't like wearing light armour?"

"Occasionally changing appearance is good too." Chu Wanning said with a dark expression as he walked away.

Although Tanlang Elder wasn't on good terms with Chu Wanning, he had to hold himself back a little bit in the presence of their sect leader. He didn't sneer at Chu Wanning openly, but it was clear what he was thinking from his eyes.

Chu Wanning looked up at Tanlang Elder expressionlessly.

Tanlang's eyes were shining with glee, almost like there were fireworks going off in there.

Chu Wanning : "....."

"Madam Wang's diagnosis was more or less correct." Tanlang Elder let go of Chu Wanning's wrist after taking his pulse, and Chu Wanning immediately yanked his hand away and tugged his sleeve back down.

"Then why has it been ten days without any change?"

Tanlang responded: "Although you didn't come into contract with much sap from the ancient willow tree, its effects are still pretty strong, so I'm afraid that it might take quite a long time to return to your original form."

"How long will it take?" Chu Wanning casually asked him casually.

Tanlang said: "Not sure, but probably about ten years."

Chu Wanning's eyes widened immediately. Tanlang Elder tried his best to keep a straight face, but his eyes were brimming with glee at Chu Wanning's misfortune: "Yup, you're gonna need ten years to return to your original form."

Chu Wanning stared at him for a while, then said gloomily: "Are you misleading me?"

"Perish the thought, I wouldn't dare mislead the great Yuheng Elder." Tanlang said with a smile, "Anyway, if you ask me, this is just fine. You're body's just smaller, your mentality slightly younger—just a tiny bit—and besides, your cultivation is unaffected, what's the rush to go back to normal?"

Chu Wanning, ashen-faced, was speechless for a while.

Tanlang continued: "However, during these ten years, there's no guarantee that you'll take the form of a child the entire time. This type of tree sap migrates along the same paths as your spiritual energy, so if you don't use any spiritual techniques for three to five months, you should be able to turn back to your original form."

"That works too!" Xue Zhengyong's eyes lit up as if he was seeing the first light of dawn.

But Tanlang smiled and continued: "Sect Leader, don't be in such a rush, I'm not done explaining yet. Even after Yuheng Elder returns to his adult form, he still won't be able to use too many techniques, because once his spiritual energy becomes depleted from overuse, the willow sap will be able to exert its influence again, and he'll turn back into a child."

"Overuse? So how much would count as too much?" Xue Zheng Yong exclaimed.

"About that, since the sap has already spread throughout his entire body." Tanlang said, "At most, he'd only be able to use two moves per day."

Chu Wanning spoke in a voice that was cold and hard as steel, "The boundary to the ghost realm develops breaches that need repairing all the time,

forging golems also uses spiritual energy. if I can only use two moves a day, I would be as good as useless.”

“Well that’s all I got.” Tanlang replied sarcastically, “After all, if the human realm suffered the loss of the Beidou Immortal, even the sun might not rise in the west tomorrow.”

Xue Zhengyong fretted with worry: “Tanlang, quit it with the sarcasm already. Out of the entire cultivation world, your medical techniques are up there, please think of something. Even if Yuheng’s cultivation hasn’t been affected, he’s still in a child’s body, so his abilities definitely aren’t the same as before. Not to mention, if the other sects hear that Yuheng was injured at Jincheng Lake, they might think to try something funny. Ten years is way too long, could you look for some medicines or something, that could maybe.....”

Tanlang Elder sneered and interrupted him mid-sentence: “Sect Leader, the sap that the Beidou Immortal was infected with is from an ancient spiritual tree, not some common poison. Do you really think that I can just come up with a cure on the spot?”

Xue Zhengyong: “.....”

“That’s enough for now, I have to go extract medicine for pills.” Tanlang said languidly, “Why don’t you two see yourselves out.”

Xue Zhengyong: “Tanlang!” He still wanted to say something, but Chu Wanning pulled on the hem of his robes, and said, “Sect Leader, let’s go.”

When they reached the door, Tanlang’s voice suddenly floated over from behind.

“Chu Wanning, if you’re willing to beg me properly and humbly, then who knows? I might be willing to help derive a cure for you. Although I’ve never seen someone with your condition before, I might not necessarily be unable to help. So why don’t you think about it carefully?”

“.....” Chu Wanning looked backwards and replied, “What would count as properly and humbly?”

Tanlang reclined on the couch, lazily sorting out the bundles of silver needles on the table, and raised his eyes at the sound of Chu Wanning’s voice, disdain apparent in his eyes: “When other people are at the end of their ropes, they get on their knees to prostrate themselves and beg for help. We’re colleagues, so I won’t ask you to get down and knock your head on the floor, but if you kneel and say some nice words towards me, then I’ll help you.”

Chu Wanning said nothing, only gazing indifferently at him.

Only after a while did he say: “Wintertime pickles, you must be dreaming.”

With that, Chu Wanning flicked his sleeves and left. Tanlang Elder was left there in a daze to figure out what wintertime pickles meant.

The days trickled by slowly. Yuheng Elder declared that he was going into seclusion to meditate, when actually, he was stuck in the body of a child and couldn’t return to his original form. Xue Zheng Yong, Madam Wang, and Tanlang Elder found out about it one after another, and, to prevent the secret from being exposed, Xuanji Elder was also informed.

A few months passed in the blink of an eye, Red Lotus Pavillion’s doors had been closed to visitors for quite a while, and Xue Meng and the others couldn’t help but to be worried.

“Shizun has been in seclusion for more than seventy days now, why hasn’t he come out yet?”

"Maybe he's refining his cultivation level." Shi Mei took a sip of spiritual mountain dew from his cup, and looked up at the dark, overcast skies outside the window, "It's going to snow, and soon it will be the new year, I wonder if Shizun will come out before then."

Mo Ran was flipping lazily through a manual of sword techniques, and upon hearing Shimei's words, said, "Probably not. Didn't he send us a message with his haitang flower a couple days ago to say that it would be a while yet? I doubt he'll be out in time."

It was a rest day on Sisheng peak, when the disciples didn't need to practice cultivation. Mo Ran and the other two were gathered together to enjoy some freshly brewed tea and warmed wine. The bamboo curtains of the small pavillion in the yard were half drawn, the heavy curtains concealing its occupants, and steam wafted lightly from beneath.

Lately, there's been a new addition who often hangs out with them—Xuanji Elder's disciple, Xia Sini.

Ever since that day when he met Xue Meng, Xue Meng had dragged him over to cultivate or play together every couple of days, and before long, the group had become inseparable.

And so, Yuheng Elder's group of three disciples mysteriously got a fourth.

At this moment, Chu Wanning, assuming the name Xia Sini, was seated in front of the table eating pastries. He ate in a refined manner, but the speed at which he ate wasn't lacking at all.

Xue Meng glanced at him inadvertently, paused in surprise, then his gaze doubled back to the plate and he uttered in surprise: "Wow, little shidi, who'd you inherit this bottomless stomach from?"

Chu Wanning was chewing leisurely on a piece of osmanthus cake. The cake was delicious, and he didn't bother responding to Xue Meng; after all, there was somebody fighting over the food with him.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning's hands landed on the last piece of crispy lotus pastry at the same time. Their eyes shot up, and it seemed as if there was lightning crackling between their gazes.

Chu Wanning: "Let go."

Mo Ran: "Nope."

"Hands off."

"You've already eaten eight pieces, this one is mine."

"You can have any of the other ones, just not the lotus pastry."

Mo Ran glared at the little fellow for a while before pulling out his trump card: "Shidi, if you eat too many sweets you'll get cavities."

"That's fine." Chu Wanning was very calm, "I'm six, it wouldn't be embarrassing."

Mo Ran "....."

There was a loud 'PA!' as Xue Meng's slap landed alongside his scathing complaints: "Mo Weiyu how annoying can you get, how old are you already, to still fight Shidi for food???"

The moment Mo Ran covered his head with an "Aiyo," Chu Wanning had already swiftly snatched the lotus pastry, hands quick and face expressionless, feeling quite satisfied as he took a small bite.

"Shidi——!!!!!!!"

Chu Wanning ignored him, totally devoted to nibbling on his sweets.

The four of them were busy making a ruckus when a sharp whistling sound pierced through the skies, reverberating throughout all of ShiSheng Peak. Chu Wanning's face fell: "The gathering whistle?"

Xue Meng lifted up the hanging curtains halfway to look outside the window. The other disciples who had been walking outside also stopped in their tracks to look around with expressions of surprise.

At the sound of the gathering whistle, everyone at Sisheng Peak must gather outside in the square in front of DanQing Hall. This also meant that the whistle would only be blown when there was an emergency. Before Chu Wanning joined the sect, this whistle had sounded often whenever the ghost realm barrier had been breached. But since Chu Wanning's joining, the whistle hadn't been heard for a long time.

Shi Mei put down the book in his hand and got up to walk to Xue Meng's side: "How strange, what could be so urgent?"

"Don't know. No point wondering, let's just go take a look first."

Only Mo Ran was silent. He pressed his lips together, and his eyelashes fluttered downwards, covering the flicker of something unnatural flashing across his eyes. He knew what this whistle foretold, but the timing was slightly different than he remembered, he didn't think that it would happen this soon.....

The four of them arrived at Sisheng Peak, and the other disciples also came one after another. Before long, the entirety of Loyalty Square was filled with all of the elders and their disciples.

Once everyone had gathered, Xue Zhengyong walked out from the tightly-shut doors of Loyalty Hall to stand before the jade-banded platform railing, above flights of limestone steps. Six beautiful women followed behind him, some charming looking, others cold seeming, but all were impossibly gorgeous. They stood against the wind, wearing only thin muslin robes in such bitterly cold weather, and at a glance, their red skirts were like the clouds at dawn, their eyes seemed lit with scarlet flames amidst the delicate fluttering of silken ribbons, and the space between each of their eyebrows was marked with a crimson blaze.

Xue Meng was stunned.

Not only him—the expressions of just about every person in the square changed upon seeing the six women.

Xue Meng stared blankly for a long time before he managed to speak with a trembling voice: "Envos of the feathered tribe..... did, did they come from Zhuque^[2], the land of immortals?"

Author's Notes:

Mini theatre 《How to make you happy》

Sisheng Peak disciple A wants to join under the teachings of Chu Wanning. But heard the elder is very rigid, thus decided to ask the three shixionsg for advice.

Disciple A: Hello young master! I'm disciple A! What should I do to make elder Yuheng happy?

Xue Meng: First, you need to be strict with yourself, be keen on your studies with diligence, then you need to brace the cold winds and not be swayed with difficulty, lastly you need to be hard-wearing. If Shizun strikes your left cheek, remember to present your right cheek, if Shizun wants to cut off your left leg, remember to stick out your right leg too.

Disciple A felt despair, thus he went to Shi Mingjing for help.

Shi Mei: To make Shizun happy? Very easy, you just need to remember drinking wine he likes to drink pear blossom wine eating fish he likes to eat lake

perch three pieces of tang yuan is just enough rice wine pudding ten bowls is not too little cold winters he likes to steep tea there needs to be a lot of rose petals in tea barbecue meat has to have a sprinkle of cumin there can't be a single piece of chili...

Disciple A:

He only had his last savior Mo Weiyu left.

Mo Ran: Oh, no problem, my method is really easy.

Disciple A: What is it?

Mo Ran: Sleep him.

Disciple A:

Mo Ran: If once is not enough then twice, if twice is not enough then ten times....

Disciple A: I'm afraid the next day after the first time I will be put on the fucking stool.

Mo Ran: ? Who said to allow him to be able to get out of bed the next day? At what rate did you think I meant when I said if twice is not enough then ten times?

Disciple: W-What rate?

Mo Ran: The whole night.

Disciple A, in the end, abandoned the thought.

Ch.55 This Venerable One Feels Uneasy

Zhuque may be called the land of immortals, but its residents are not, in fact, immortals. Rather, but a people of half-immortal, half-demon mixed blood.

In the cultivation world, they are the beings that most resemble immortals, and are also known as the “feathered tribe.”

The feathered tribe has always lived in their own Peach Blossom Spring^[8] beyond the maze of JiuHua Mountain, rarely ever interfering in matters of the human world. But half of the blood that flowed in their bodies was still mortal after all, so they weren't completely detached. Thus, they would often appear at times of turmoil or disaster in the cultivation world and use their immense powers to help the mortals through the crisis.

When Mo Ran was raising hell and turning the world upside down in the last lifetime, the feathered tribe had appeared in droves. But their power couldn't best the emperor who had already perfected the forbidden technique in the end, and Mo Ran had chased down and killed every single one, treading across the ground covered in blood and scorched feathers.

Zhuque, the land of immortals was burned down in one day.

It was an extremely frantic memory, so much so that even Mo Ran would break out in a cold sweat whenever he recalled it afterwards. He thought that he was like a man possessed at that time, endlessly cruel.

But right now, he clearly did not yet have the strength to contend with the feathered tribe. In fact, due to the natural superiority of their blood, the vast majority of cultivators fell short of them in terms of spiritual strength. Out of the entire Sisheng Peak, only a few of the most stellar elders could even exchange blows with them.

Xue Meng unintentionally saw Mo Ran's face and got quite the scare:
“What's up with you? Why's your face so pale?”

“It's nothing.” Mo Ran lowered his eyelashes and whispered, “I just ran too fast earlier.”

The arrival of the feathered tribe marked the beginning of Shi Mei's tragedy in the last lifetime. Mo Ran's heart jumped to his throat; he thought it would be a while yet before these events happened, why did the progression of so many things change so much from before?

The faint winter sun hung weakly in the sky, illuminating the world in a layer of deathly white.

Standing underneath, Mo Ran couldn't help reaching out and taking Shi Mei's hand.

Shi Mei blinked: "What's wrong?"

"....." Mo Ran shook his head and said nothing.

Just then, Xue Zhengyong started speaking. His words weren't much different from what he said in the last life.

"The reason I called everyone here today is because envoys of the feathered tribe have come once again. Just like eighty years ago, they came from the Peach Blossom Spring to the human world to help in a foretold calamity."

A pause as he looked slowly over the disciples gathered below.

"As everyone knows, the barrier to the ghost realm was originally set by the god Fuxi, but it has gradually weakened over these past million years, and would break every few decades. In recent years, its power fades by the day, and despite everyone's utmost efforts——"

Xue Meng huffed under his breath: "Dad's talking some nonsense, it's clearly the efforts of basically just Shizun."

"Despite everyone's utmost efforts, the breach grows bigger still, and the barrier will eventually break down like it did decades ago. When that time comes, the boundary between the human realm and the ghost realm will be broken, thousands of ghosts and spirits will rush out, and ordinary people will suffer. In order to avert this calamity, envoys of the feathered tribe have come to the sects to select those with the most suitable spiritual energy and innate skill to go to the Peach Blossom Spring to cultivate in seclusion."

His words caused a commotion in the crowd.

The feathered tribe is picking people to go advance their cultivation at the Peach Blossom Spring in the land of the immortals?!

All of the disciples grew from amazement to excitement, and, regardless of actual ability, each secretly held hopes and expectations.

Only Mo Ran alone was not the least bit glad, his features subtly showing anxiety instead. He was usually very good at feigning appearances, so much so that others couldn't even tell real from fake, but right now, he couldn't hide his feelings at all——

This had to do with Shi Mei's survival. Back then, Shi Mei was selected by the feathered tribe and went to the Peach Blossom Spring to cultivate. Not long after his return, the breach underwent a large scale breakdown, and huge hordes of ghosts climbed up from hell.

Shi Mei fought alongside Chu Wanning in the ensuing battle, each taking one side of the array, working together to repair the biggest breach. However, Shi Mei wasn't as strong as Chu Wanning, and the countless ghosts, seeing that the mortal realm was about to be closed off, all charged toward Shi Mei in a murderous stream as he was focusing on maintaining the balance in the barrier, and ran him through in an instant!

The demonic energy pierced through his heart and soul.

Chu Wanning didn't even lift a single finger to help, didn't even attempt to stop them. As Shi Mei fell from atop the coiled dragon pillar, he chose instead to use all of the remainder of his power to seal off the rest of the barrier that Shi Mei wasn't able to.

It was snowing that day. Shi Mei's falling form seemed as if it was just another of the countless small, insignificant flakes of snow.

The snow fell nonstop, covering the sky. No one would care if a flake of the frozen crystal was about to melt, just like generation after generation of people, the decades of their lives from birth to death, none but their close relatives would care about an ordinary person's death.

In that snow, in that pandemonium, Mo Ran held Shi Mei as his breathing grew shallower and shallower, kneeling on the ground begging Chu Wanning to please spare him a glance, to please save him.

But in the end Chu Wanning only turned away, chose to walk away into the boundless white, to accomplish his own prestige, severing the bonds between master and disciple.

How laughable.

The things Chu Wanning liked, the things he cared about, the things he pursued, all of it was so very laughable.

For example, Chu Wanning liked the sound of rain in the lotus pond, and he liked the melancholic verses of the poet Du, with that frighteningly strict adherence to form.

For example, Chu Wanning cared about the sprouting of plants in the coming of spring, the death of cicadas with the arrival of autumn; he cared about where the flames of war were lit once again, and where the common people struggled.

For example, Chu Wanning had always taught them to be righteous, to put the people before the self.

But Mo Ran thought, fuck the people!

He didn't know or care about those people, what did it matter to him whether they lived or died?

If Chu Wanning's rain poured over the mutterings of lost souls, if his plants were splashed with the tears of refugees, Mo Ran didn't care. His rain was normal rain, and his plants were ordinary plants. The 'common people' were just so many words on a piece of paper, who the hell cares.

And so he thought, Chu Wanning was despicable, a hypocrite who spouted words of duty and compassion as if his heart was big enough to hold everything under the sky, but in reality, that pathetically narrow chest of his didn't even have a place for his own disciple.

Afterwards, he had angrily asked Chu Wanning, *does your heart ache? Do you feel any unease at all? You said to put the people before the self, but you're still alive while Shi Mei died following your commands! You're the one who got him killed, you hypocrite, you liar!*

Do you even have a heart?

When Shi Mei fell from the platform, he was calling for you, he was calling 'Shizun,' did you hear him? Did you hear him? Why didn't you save him..... why didn't you save him!!

Chu Wanning, you have stone for a heart.

You've.....

Never cared about us.

You didn't care..... you didn't care.....

And then, everything ended up the way they did.

Chu Wanning became adored and respected by everyone in the cultivation world, practically a king just without the crown, and no one spared a thought for those who had perished; Shi Mei's death was like an unremarkable step under the feet of the victorious.

He traded an ungifted disciple for peace and prosperity, the so-called world peace.

No one would say he was wrong in that.

Only Mo Ran saw that the brilliant crown atop his head was made of the bones of the dead, that his success was built Shi Mei's death.

He hated to the bottom of his heart.

"Hey, young man."

"Hey——"

There was a warm hand on his forehead all of a sudden. Mo Ran started and opened his eyes as he was ripped from his pitch-black memories.

Before him was a delicate face, bright and lovely. One of the envoys of the feathered tribe had approached without him knowing, and was smiling gently at him.

"Spacing out with such a great opportunity right in front of you?"

"Ah, big sister, please don't mind." Mo Ran did his best to cheer up so as to not rouse any suspicion, smiling back at the envoy, "I've always liked to daydream, and was so hoping to be selected that I got lost in my imaginations of what the Peach Blossom Spring might look like, so sorry about that."

It turned out that, while Mo Ran was lost in his memories, the envoys of the feathered tribe had already come down and began picking people, but he was so caught up in his tangled thoughts that he was wholly unaware of things happening around him.

The envoy smiled sweetly, and then said something that Mo Ran hadn't been expecting at all: "Your spiritual energy is pure, and your cultivation and aptitude are both remarkable as well. If you want to go to the Peach Blossom Spring, then come along with me."

Mo Ran: "....."

Mo Ran: "!!!!!"

To the Peach Blossom Spring?

Only Shi Mei and Chu Wanning were chosen in the last lifetime, why is this life——

He was too shocked to even speak. Luckily, being chosen by the feathered tribe is naturally something worthy of shock and amazement, so the people nearby didn't find his reaction odd at all, only gazing at him with envy.

The envoy brought him to Loyalty Hall, and as the initial shock subsided and his heart stopped hammering in his chest, his eyes began to fill with an ecstasy that no one else saw.

Things were indeed different this life.

Even though he didn't yet know if these changes were for better or for worse, and why exactly the fates had even changed at all, at least he could go to the Peach Blossom Spring too. If he studies under the feathered tribe as well, then the heavy task of repairing the barrier might not fall on Shi Mei when the time comes.

He wasn't some cultured man; even after living two lives, he still didn't understand what putting the people before the self even meant.

But Shi Mei was the person who was the kindest to him in this world, and nothing else mattered in front of this person.

Including his own meat sack and this half a wisp of returned soul.
As long as Shi Mei lives, he would throw it all away.

But when the envoys had finished their selection and gathered them all in front of Loyalty Hall, Mo Ran found that the lineup was completely different from the last life.

Shi Mei was here as before, but as a result of being in seclusion, Chu Wanning missed the selection, so he wasn't amongst the chosen, and in his place was Xuanji Elder's disciple Xia Sini.

And even more surprising was the fact that Xue Meng had also been invited to the Peach Blossom Spring, per the words of the envoy: "There is a lingering power of the Exalted Gouchen's sacred sword on your person, how interesting."

From the Heaven-Piercing Tower nearby came the deep sound of a clock reverberating throughout Sisheng Peak.

"From Sisheng Peak of the lower cultivation realm, the chosen are Xue Ziming, Mo Weiyu, Shi Mingjing, and Xia Sini, for a total of four." The head of the envoys conveyed to Xue Zhengyong before releasing a messenger myna bird.

Lifting her hand with the vividly colored bird perched atop a fingertip, she continued in a clear voice: "These four are exceptional individuals, suitable in aptitude and genuine in character. Thus concludes this report."

With that, she released the bird. The myna memorized her words and, with a flutter of its powerful wings, quickly vanished into the vast skies.

To be able to go cultivate at the Peach Blossom Spring was a rare opportunity, even more so than acquiring a holy weapon, and no one would turn it down. Moreover, they would be studying techniques to ward against the breakdown of the barrier to the ghost realm, the very duty and obligation of those who cultivate, and no one could turn it down.

As for the time, it could take anywhere from a couple of months to three or even five years.

But the feathered tribe was not unreasonable; seeing that it was nearly the end of the year, they said to stay and spend New Year's Eve first, then they will come bring the group to the Peach Blossom Spring at JiuHua Mountain.

Thinking about how he will soon be able to go together with Shi Mei to the Peach Blossom Spring, Mo Ran couldn't help feeling overjoyed. However, it was not long before the joy faded away. He didn't understand why at first, until one day, passing by the foot of the southern peak of Sisheng Peak, he looked up to see the sealed-off Red Lotus Pavilion.

Mo Ran's steps slowed subconsciously, then came to a stop altogether. He stood there, gazing up where the mountain disappeared into the clouds.

Chu Wanning had been in seclusion for over three months.

In this life, the hatred he held toward this person seemed to be ebbing away..... Even if he reminded himself time and again to not forget the look on Chu Wanning's face when he abandoned him and Shi Mei, there were still times when he empathized with him, when he felt confused and disconcerted.

Xia Sini was walking with him. Seeing the odd expression on Mo Ran's face and the way he stared at the southern peak lost in thought, his heart skipped a beat and he asked: "What is it?"

"Little shidi, do you think he will come out before we leave?"
".....He?"

"Ah." Mo Ran paused, coming back to his senses, and smiled toward Chu Wanning. Having spent quite some time together, he felt that this little shidi was clever and sensible, and liked him a lot, "I was talking about my Shizun, Yuheng Elder."

Chu Wanning: "I see....."

Mo Ran sighed, muttering: "He's never been in seclusion for this long before. Could it be that the injury he got at Jincheng Lake was actually very serious?"

This was the first time in a long while that he brought up his shizun of his own accord.

Chu Wanning already knew that it was impossible, but still couldn't help asking: "Do you..... miss him?"

Ch.56 This Venerable One is Busy Wrapping Dumplings

To be asked such a question, Mo Ran's face was one of bewilderment.
Do I miss him?

In spite of the deep, unforgettable resentment from his previous life, Chu Wanning had never wronged him in this one. Instead, he'd shielded him over and over from danger, and he was the one who was covered head to toe in injuries and bruised black and blue for him instead.

After a long time, he finally responded: "En.....All of these times that he's been injured, it was all because of me....."

Seeing the expression on his face, Chu Wanning felt a twinge of warmth in his heart. He wanted to say something back to Mo Ran, but stopped after hearing what he said next.

"He's done too much for me, and I can only hope to help him recover a little bit quicker. I don't want to owe him too much."

That flicker of warmth his heart seems to have died, completely unmoving, frozen over.

Chu Wanning stood still for a little while, feeling as though he was extremely laughable.

Mo Ran already told him that the only thing between them was the relationship between master and disciple. It was his own fault that his head became dizzy with excitement at the slightest bit of hope, flying like a moth into a blazing fire, and being scorched into ashes—he couldn't blame anyone else.

Chu Wanning smiled; it was probably an ugly, dejected smile.

"You're overthinking it. You are his disciple, so there's no such thing as owing him debts. Everything he does, he does willingly."

Mo Ran's eyes turned to him: "And you—you're still so small, but you're always turning your nose up, giving cheek and imitating how adults speak." He said, laughing brightly, and rubbed Xia Sini's head.

Chu Wanning's head was patted for a while. He was still laughing at first, but after a while, his eyes slowly started to fill up with tears, and, facing the dazzlingly brilliant face in front of him, he said softly: "Mo Ran, I don't want to play with you anymore, let go."

Mo Ran's skull was several inches too thick, so he didn't notice any changes in his shidi's expression. Besides that, he had gotten so used to joking around

and yelling with "Xia Sini" that he didn't hesitate to pinch the child's soft, baby-smooth cheeks. Mo Ran's lips quirked up softly, and he made a funny face.

"Pfft, why is little shidi mad this time?"

Chu Wanning stared at the child reflected in the other's eyes, with such an ugly smile on his pinched face, like a pathetic, funny-looking monster.

"Let go."

Mo Ran didn't notice, and continued teasing him just as he did before: "Okay, okay, don't be mad, I won't say that you're pretending to be an adult, hm? Come here, let's make up, call me Shi-ge~"

"Let go of me....."

"Be good, call me shi-ge, and I'll buy you osmanthus cake to eat in a bit."

Chu Wanning closed his eyes, eyelashes trembling slightly, and finally spoke, his voice hoarse.

"Mo Ran, I'm not kidding around, I really don't want to play with you anymore. Can you let go of me, let go, ok?" His slender eyebrows knitted together, and tears didn't trickle out from his eyes because they were tightly shut. However, he spoke in a voice choked with sobs, "Mo Ran, it hurts....."

It hurt too much to hold one person in his heart, so he hid him carefully in the very depths of his heart. It was fine if that person didn't like him, as long as he could think about that person quietly, protect that person silently; it was fine if he couldn't have that person, all of it was fine.

But that person's warmth and tenderness were given only to others, and the only things offered to him were barbs and thorns. He held him in his heart, and whenever that person moved, his heart would start bleeding. Day after day, new wounds would appear before the old ones had even healed over.

It was then that Chu Wanning knew that even if he wasn't vying to obtain this person's affections, every single moment that he held him in his heart would hurt him to his core.

He didn't know how long he'd be able to bear this kind of pain, didn't know when he'd break down from it completely.

Mo Ran finally noticed that something was off, and frantically let go. He touched the other's red-tinged cheeks, at a complete loss as to what to do. Chu Wanning suddenly thought that being in the body of a child wasn't a bad thing.

At least, this way, he could say so if it hurt without restraint, could show a little bit of his vulnerable side.

At least, this way, he would look toward him with concern.

This was something that he would've never even dared to think about before.

In the blink of an eye, it was already New Year's Eve. This was the liveliest time of year on ShiSheng Peak. All of the disciples were busy putting up red paper talismans and sweeping snowdrifts. The head chef at Mengpo Hall was busy from dawn till dusk, preparing delicacies for the end-of-year feast. Also, all of the elders prepared spells and charms that they specialized in to add to the festivities to help welcome the New Year. For example, Tanlang Elder transformed a pool of fresh spring water into fragrant wine, and Xuanji Elder released the three thousand fire light mice that he'd been raising, allowing them to scatter around the sect and to keep watch wherever they were, bringing

everyone a little bit of warmth and respite from the cold. LuCun Elder enchanted the snowmen everyone made to run around the peak and yell "Happy New Year" at anyone they ran into.

No one expected Yuheng Elder to do anything; as a matter of fact, he was still in seclusion. He'd been gone for a long time, and hadn't appeared in front of anybody since the very start.

Xue Meng stood by the window, his face tilted upwards, looking at the petals of haitang blossoms fluttering from the skies, and spoke as though preoccupied with something: "We'll be gone after today. It seems we won't be able to see him before we leave after all.....I wonder what Shizun's doing right now?"

"He's definitely cultivating." Mo Ran said through a mouthful of apple, "Speaking of which, all of the elders are supposed to put on a performance tonight. It sucks that Shizun isn't here—if he was, he'd have to perform too. I wonder what he could even do."

Mo Ran laughed before continuing: "Maybe he'd put on a display of "How to get Angry," eh?"

Xue Meng glared at him: "How about a performance of "Whipping Mo Weiyu to Death'?"

It was the New Year, so Mo Ran didn't get angry at Xue Meng's harsh joke. He suddenly thought of something, and asked: "Oh yeah, have you seen the little Shidi today?"

"You mean Xia Sini?" Xue Meng replied, "I haven't seen him, but in any case, he's Xuanji Elder's disciple. Xuanji is already being gracious to not mind him hanging out with us every day, but if he kept sticking around us even during the New Year festivities, his Shizun might really lose his mind."

Mo Ran laughed: "I guess."

The rays of the setting sun turned into evening above Red Lotus Pavilion. Chu Wanning held a pill in his hand, looking it over carefully. Xue Zhengyong was sitting across from him and pouring himself a cup of tea, since Chu Wanning didn't invite him to have some. He also ate a crispy pastry from the plate, etiquette be damned.

Chu Wanning glared at him, but Xue Zhengyong kept chewing obliviously: "Yuheng, aren't you done looking at it yet? Tanlang can be pretty harsh with his words, but his intentions aren't bad at all. It's not like he'd actually harm you."

".....What are you saying, Sect Leader." Chu Wanning replied lightly, "I was just thinking that since Tanlang Elder already went through the trouble to concoct a pill that would allow me to regain my adult form for one day, then why doesn't he just extract a couple more of them? That way, I can just take one when the need arises."

"Aiya, if only it was that easy," Xue Zhengyong said, "The raw materials that go into making this medicine are rare beyond measure, and Tanlang's already out of materials after refining three of them. It's not a long-term plan."

"I see." Chu Wanning replied, deep in thought. "So that's how it is, please give him my thanks."

"Haha." Xue Zhengyong waved his hand, "You two are actually pretty similar you know, curt with your words, but not bad at heart."

Chu Wanning shot a glare over at him, but didn't say anything. He poured himself a cup of tea, and swallowed the medicine that would allow him to return

to his original form.

Xue Zhengyong was just about to eat another pastry when Chu Wanning stopped his hand.

"Wha?" The sect leader said unhappily.

Chu Wanning spoke: "Mine."

Xue Zhengyong: "....."

When night fell on Sisheng peak, all of the disciples filtered into Mengpo Hall, one after the other. Each elder brought their disciples and sat down together to knead dough and make dumplings. Both the snowmen and the fire light mice threaded through the throngs of people, passing them jars of salt, red pepper powder, saucers of chopped scallions, and other miscellaneous things.

Every table was bustling with excitement and chattering laughter. Yuheng Elder's table was the only exception—the disciples were all here, but the master was absent.

Xue Meng looked around him for a bit, sighing: "I miss Shizun."

Shimei replied warmly: "Didn't Shizun send us a letter a few days ago, telling us to enjoy the festivities and to work hard on our cultivation at the Peach Blossom Springs, and that he'll come see us as soon as he comes out of seclusion?"

"He did say that, but just when will he come out of seclusion....."

Xue Meng sighed sorrowfully, his eyes wandering listlessly past the gates, when he suddenly sat up straight, eyes opened wide like a cat and staring out the gates

Xue Meng's face paled and then coloured, flushed a dizzying shade of red, and his eyes shone brightly. He was so excited that he couldn't even speak properly: "That..... that's..... that's....."

Mo Ran thought that one of the rare spiritual beasts that Xuanji Elder raised had escaped to liven things up a bit, and thought that Xue Meng was surprised because he was inexperienced and overreacting. He laughed: "That's what—look at you, it's like you saw an immortal or something, what's there to be so sur
_____"

He turned around, still grinning gleefully, and casually looked up.
And couldn't finish the rest of his sentence.

Standing in the snowy dusk outside the door was Chu Wanning, dressed in white robes with a vividly red cape. He turned elegantly to the side to put away his umbrella and shake off the dusting of snow, then his eyelashes flicked up to reveal a pair of bright, slender phoenix eyes underneath, a mild glance sweeping over them.

With just this one glance, by the time Mo Ran came back to his senses, his heart was already beating fast and his palms were covered in sweat, and even his breathing had slowed down involuntarily.

The chatter in Mengpo Hall gradually quieted down. Usually, whenever Chu Wanning appeared in Mengpo Hall, the disciples didn't dare to cause a ruckus. Even more so now, to suddenly appear on New Year's Eve after having been in seclusion for such a long time, the snowflakes on him seemed to make his face even fairer and more beautiful, and made his eyebrows seem a darker and more defined.

Mo Ran stood up, murmuring: "Shizun....."

Xue Meng bounded up and sprinted with kitten-like excitement towards Chu Wanning, yelling "SHIZUN!!!!!" while running into Chu Wanning's arms.

Chu Wanning's clothes were thoroughly chilled from the bitter cold outside, but Xue Meng wore an expression like he was holding peach blossoms from early spring, or a coal fire from late summer, endlessly warm. Xue Meng began to shout noisily, not stopping to take a breath: "Shizun, you've finally come out! I thought that we wouldn't be able to see you before leaving, but you love us after all!!!! Shizun, shizun....."

Shi Mei also came over and bowed respectfully, his face beaming with delight: "Congratulations to Shizun for coming out of seclusion."

Chu Wanning patted Xue Meng's head, and nodded in Shi Mei's direction: "This master has arrived slightly late, but let's go greet the new year together."

He sat down at the feast, with Xue Meng at his side and Mo Ran across from him.

With Chu Wanning's arrival, and after the initial hubbub and excitement died down, the three disciples fell into their usual habits, sitting upright and still like their Shizun. Their table was weirdly silent.

There was flour, ground meat, eggs, and many other types of ingredients on the table, along with a brand-new copper coin.

Mo Ran was the one with the best cooking skills in their group. Thus, everyone decided that he'd be the one to give instructions.

"Well, I guess I'll take charge, then." Mo Ran replied, laughing, "Do you guys know how to roll dough?"

Nobody uttered a word.

".....Ok, I'll roll out the wrappers then." Mo Ran said, "Shi Mei, you make the best wontons, and dumpling filling isn't all that different, so why don't you make the filling."

Shi Mei hesitated for a while before saying: "This.....There's some difference after all, I'm afraid that I might not be able to do it properly."

Chu Wanning replied lightly: "It's fine as long as it's edible, don't worry too much."

Shi Mei smiled: "Okay then."

"Xue Meng, you can just pass the water or help roll our sleeves up or something. Just don't get in the way."

Xue Meng: "....."

"As for Shizun." Mo Ran grinned, "Would Shizun like to sit by the side and have a nice cup of tea?"

Chu Wanning replied coldly: "I'll wrap the dumplings."

"Ah?" Mo Ran exclaimed, startled, thinking that he might've gone violently deaf in both ears. "What did you want to do?"

"I said, I'll wrap the dumplings."

Mo Ran: "....."

Mo Ran suddenly thought that he would've much rather gone violently deaf in both ears after all.

Author's Notes:

There are some little baobeis with questions about the story's background setting. Although bits and pieces have already appeared in the book and more will be written in the future. There is yet to be a detailed summary, after all, world expositions tend to be less interesting. I'm afraid of everybody falling asleep if I fed it to you all at once hahaha~ So today's author's notes will contain a segment of the setting, take a look if it interests you.

First is about upper and lower cultivation world, the "upper" in upper cultivation means the rising of pure air, coastal area on the map, near Kunlun sky pond, these places are all upper cultivation world. The "lower" in lower cultivation indicates the sinking of tainted air, overflowing with spirits and monsters, with the necropolis FengDu as center, most located in SiChuan and GuiZhou region. Upper cultivation world has an abundance of cultivation energy, suitable for cultivation practice. Thus there are nine large sects in the upper cultivation world, while lower cultivation world only has Sisheng Peak.

In regards to cultivation: There is no clear differentiation of ranking such as golden core, foundation, passing trials or grandmaster. After the spiritual core's awakening, there is only continuous strengthening of one's own cultivation ability. There is no complex grading system. Cultivators practice to achieve goals such as gaining exception spiritual powers, to become the top amongst peers. But of course there are ones like Shizun, who want to use their powers to do good deeds. People with tremendous amounts of power can live up to a hundred years, maintain youthful appearance, and become a celestial being upon their death. However ones who have been able to ascend while they are still alive can be counted with one hand. Dying of old age, then reincarnate into the next life tend to be the end result for the majority of cultivators.

Ch.57 This Venerable One Listens to You Play the Guqin Once Again

>>dubcon

Unexpectedly, although Chu Wanning's dumpling-wrapping technique was clumsy, the finished product actually wasn't bad. The dumplings made by those long fingers of his were adorably round, lining up neatly on the table.

All three disciples were dumbstruck.

"Shizun actually knows how to make dumplings....."

"Am I dreaming right now?"

"He's really good at it, too."

"Wow....."

Of course their hushed mutterings didn't escape Chu Wanning's ears. Chu Wanning pressed his lips together, eyelashes fluttering imperceptibly, and even though he was expressionless as always, the tips of his ears grew a little bit pink.

Xue Meng couldn't resist asking: "Shizun, is this your first time making dumplings?"

".....Mn."

"Then how are you making them so nice-looking."

".....It's not so different from making golems, just folding a few creases, there's nothing to it."

Mo Ran watched him from across the wooden table, gradually becoming lost in thought.

The only time he had ever seen Chu Wanning cook in the last life was after Shi Mei's passing. That day, he had gone to the kitchen and slowly made the wontons that were Shi Mei's specialty.

But before they could make it into the pot, they were struck to the ground by a Mo Ran who had lost all sense, the snowy wontons rolling all over the floor.

Mo Ran had no recollection at all of whether those wontons were round or flat, well-made or deformed.

The only thing he remembered was the look on Chu Wanning's face, the way he had stared at him without a word, with bits of flour still on his face, looking strangely unfamiliar, somewhat at a loss, even a bit dumb.....

Mo Ran had thought that he would get angry, but Chu Wanning had said nothing in the end, only bending over and, with his head lowered, quietly picked up the dirty wontons one by one, gathered them together, and then tossed them into the trash.

Just what was going through Chu Wanning's mind at that time?

Mo Ran didn't know; he had never thought about it, didn't want to think about it, and, truthfully, didn't dare think about it.

The dumplings were all done being wrapped, and the little snowmen carried them away to the kitchen to be boiled. In accordance with tradition, Chu Wanning put a copper coin into one of them; whoever gets it would have good luck.

It wasn't long before the snowmen brought back cooked dumplings, complete with spicy and sour dipping sauce in the wooden tray.

Xue Meng said: "Shizun, please go ahead first."

Chu Wanning did not decline. He picked up a dumpling with his chopsticks and put it in his bowl, but did not eat it, instead picking up three more and giving them to Xue Meng, Mo Ran, and Shi Mei.

"Happy New Year." Chu Wanning said mildly.

The disciples were taken aback for a moment before they all broke into smiles: "Shizun, happy New Year."

As it happens, Mo Ran bit into the copper coin with a crack on the very first dumpling. He was caught totally off guard, and nearly broke a tooth on it.

Looking at the grimace on his face, Shi Mei laughed: "A-Ran is sure to have good luck this year."

Xue Meng: "Tch, lucky bastard."

Mo Ran, teary-eyed: "Thithunn, arenth you a litthle too gooth af pickihg dumphlingth, I gof it on the ferry firth one....."

Chu Wanning: "Speak properly."

Mo Ran: "I bhith my tonn."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran rubbed his cheek and took a sip of the tea Shi Mei offered before the pain finally subsided a little, and he immediately began joking around: "Haha, could it be that Shizun memorized which dumpling had the copper coin and deliberately gave it to me?"

"You wish."

Chu Wanning said coldly, then lowered his head and started eating.

Mo Ran wasn't sure if he was seeing things, but under the warm candlelight, Chu Wanning's face seemed a little red.

After the dumplings, a sumptuous dinner prepared by the head chef was brought out, platefuls of meat and fish covering the entire table.

Mengpo Hall grew even livelier. From the seat of honor, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang directed the little snowmen to deliver red packets to every table.

A little snowman bumped insistently against Chu Wanning's knee, the stones it has for eyes rolling around as it stared at him.

Chu Wanning blinked: "Hm? Even I get one?"

He accepted the red packet and opened it to find a handful of pricey golden leaves. A little lost for words, he looked up at Xue Zhengyong, only to see the carefree man grinning back at himself before raising the cup of wine in his hand toward him in a toast.

How silly.

But then again, Xue Zhengyong was really..... really.....

Chu Wanning stared at him for a while, and couldn't help the faint smile that curved the corners of his lips. He raised his own cup in return toward the sect leader, and downed it in one gulp.

Chu Wanning divided the golden leaves amongst his disciples. Three rounds of drinks later, accompanied by non-stop performances on the stage, the atmosphere at the table finally grew lively as well.

Mostly due to the fact that it seems the three brats have grown less afraid of him.

As for Chu Wanning, he's always been able to hold his alcohol.

"Shizun Shizun, let me read your palm?"

Xue Meng was the first to get all tipsy.

He grabbed Chu Wanning's hand and held it in front of his eyes to carefully examine. If not for the three cups of wine in his system, he never would've dared to be this bold.

"Your life line is long but disjointed, which means your health isn't too good." Xue Meng mumbled, "You get sick easily."

Mo Ran laughed: "That's pretty accurate."

Chu Wanning shot him a glare.

"A long and slender ring finger, Shizun has good fortune with money."

"Three lines from a common point, the love line branches off at its tip to merge down into the wisdom line, typically indicates a willingness to sacrifice for love....." Xue Meng stared at it blankly for a while before whipping his head up to ask, "Is that true?"

Face ashen, Chu Wanning hissed between gritted teeth: "Xue Ziming, are you tired of being alive?"

But Xue Meng, too drunk to detect the mortal danger he was in, just grinned sincerely and kept right on looking, muttering: "Ah, and, the love line forms an island shape, right beneath the ring finger at that, Shizun, your taste in people is dreadful... absolutely abysmal....."

Chu Wanning had had enough. He ripped his hand away and brushed his sleeve down to leave.

Mo Ran was about to die of laughter, doubled over holding his stomach and cackling loudly, when he suddenly caught Chu Wanning's icy, murderous gaze and forcibly swallowed his laughter, his ribs aching with the effort.

Chu Wanning said angrily: "What're you laughing about? What's so funny?"

He was just about to storm off in a rage when Xue Meng grabbed his sleeve. Immediately after, all the laughter disappeared from Mo Ran's face as Xue Meng pulled Chu Wanning down in a drunken daze and burrowed into his arms, with his forehead pressed against the folds of his Shizun's robes and his arms wrapped around his waist, nuzzling affectionately.

“Shizun……” Came the teenager’s soft, velvety voice, complete with a tinge of acting cute, “Don’t go~~ come come, have another round~”

Chu Wanning looked like he was going to choke.

“Xue Ziming!! Wh-what do you think you’re doing, let go!”

But right at this moment, the little snowmen from the stage suddenly all clacked over. It turns out that Tanlang Elder’s sword dance performance was over, and it was now Chu Wanning’s turn to put on a show.

Unfortunately, this also meant that all the eyes in the hall turned collectively toward Chu Wanning just in time to see a drunken Xue Meng clinging to Yuheng Elder’s waist and burrowing into the other’s arms like a spoiled child. The other disciples were absolutely flabbergasted, with someone even holding their chopsticks upside down, all eyes staring unblinkingly at their corner.

Chu Wanning: “…………”

The scene was extremely awkward for a moment; Yuheng Elder could neither stand nor sit, locked stiffly in place by the way Xue Meng was clinging on him.

A long while passed in silence before two dry, forced chuckles came from Mo Ran’s direction: “Come on, Xue Meng, still acting so spoiled at your age?” He reached out and tried to drag him off, “Off now, don’t cling to Shizun like that.”

Xue Meng wasn’t acting spoiled on purpose; in fact, if he still remembers this when the alcohol wears off, he’d probably slap himself silly.

But he was drunken beyond all sense right now, and Mo Ran had to pry and pull for quite a while before he finally managed to rip him off of Chu Wanning.

“Sit. What number is this?”

Brows knitted, Xue Meng squinted at the single finger Mo Ran held out: “Three.”

Mo Ran: “…………”

Shi Mei laughed and couldn’t resist teasing him: “Who am I?”

“You’re Shi Mei, duh.” Xue Meng rolled his eyes impatiently.

Mo Ran joined in: “Then who am I?”

Xue Meng glared at him for a while, then said: “A dog.”

“…………” Mo Ran roared, “Xue Ziming I will make you eat those words!”

Suddenly, from the adjacent table, a Sisheng Peak disciple—who knows if he’s just naturally courageous or if alcohol took away all his inhibitions too—pointed at Chu Wanning and gleefully asked in a high-pitched voice: “Hey young master, look over there, who’s that?”

Xue Meng, an authentic lightweight, couldn’t even sit up any longer. He slumped over the table, propped his cheek in one hand, and squinted at Chu Wanning long and hard.

Chu Wanning: “…………”

Xue Meng: “…………”

Chu Wanning: “…………”

Xue Meng: “.....”

The deadlock lasted for a long while, but just when everyone thought that Xue Meng was about to pass out drunk, he suddenly grinned widely and tried to grab Chu Wanning's sleeve again.

“Immortal-gege.”

The words were clear and unmistakable.

All of the disciples: “.....”

“Pfft.”

There was no way to tell who started laughing first, but everyone lost control and joined in. Even if Chu Wanning's face was gloomy and his fuse was short, they figured that if everyone was in on it, then it's not like he could pull out Tianwen and whip every single person here. And so the lively Mengpo Hall roared with laughter, everyone chiming in over meat and booze, adding to the chaos.

“Haha, immortal-gege.”

“Yuheng Elder is so pretty that he does look like an immortal.”

“If you ask me, I'll have to use a common saying. Every time I see him I think of it.”

Someone asked: “What saying?”

“Other than the three layers of snow on you, who under the skies would be fit to don white.”

“.....You are so uncultured.”

Chu Wanning's face went through a roulette of colors before he finally decided to fake composure and pretend not to have heard at all.

He was used to being revered by everyone from a distance, but this sudden closeness born of the festive atmosphere and the abundance of wine left him at a complete loss. Faced with such a situation, he really didn't know how to react at all, and could only force himself to fake a calmness that he didn't feel.

But the bloom of pink on his ears betrayed the frozen-over expression on his handsome face.

Mo Ran noticed. He pressed his lips together and said nothing, but for some reason, a burst of jealousy surged irritably through his chest.

It's not that he didn't acknowledge Chu Wanning's good looks, but, like everyone else, he knew well that Chu Wanning's beauty was a sharp kind, like the edge of a blade, and that he was cold as snow and frost when he wasn't smiling, forbidding approach.

From his dim and narrow perspective, Chu Wanning was like a plate of savory, aromatic crispy meat, but put into a filthy, broken box, and he was the only one in the entire world who had opened the box and gotten to taste the deliciousness inside. He didn't have to worry about someone else finding out about this delicacy and drooling over it.

But tonight, bathed in the warmth of the stove fire and tipsy from the warmed wine, so many pairs of eyes were turned to that box that used to be of no interest to anyone.

Mo Ran suddenly felt nervous. He wanted to cover the box and chase away these people salivating after his food like swatting away annoying flies.

But then he remembered that, in this life, the crispy meat didn't belong to him. His hands were full with clear, translucent wontons, he had no time to chase away the wolves salivating after the meat.

To the surprise of Mo Ran and the others, Chu Wanning actually did come prepared with a New Year's show just like the other elders: a guqin performance. The disciples were starry-eyed, and someone whispered: "Who would have thought that Yuheng Elder knew how to play the guqin....."

"And he's so good at it, too, I nearly forgot to taste the meat."

Mo Ran sat there quietly without a word. Xue Meng had fallen asleep a while ago, breaths deep and even from where he was sprawled on the table. Mo Ran took the jar of wine by his hand and filled his own cup, drinking from it as he listened while staring at the person on stage, lost in thought.

The irritation in his chest grew worse.

In the last life, Chu Wanning didn't play anything at the New Year's Eve feast.

Very few people knew the way he looked when playing the guqin.

There was a guqin made of paulownia wood in the courtyard when he was being kept prisoner by Mo Ran. One day, maybe to vent his frustrations, he had sat by it, closed his eyes, and played a song.

The sound of the guqin drifted through the air, attracting birds and butterflies alike. When Mo Ran returned, the sight that greeted him was that of Chu Wanning's profile in the courtyard, indescribably lofty and serene.

And just how had he treated him back then?

Oh, right.

He had pushed him down and fucked him next to the guqin, violated this man who was clear and cold as the light of the moon right there in the courtyard. Mo Ran cared only about chasing his own pleasure, not even sparing a thought for Chu Wanning's pain and discomfort, even disregarding the fact that it was already winter, and his Shizun, who couldn't handle the cold, was lying there on the ice-cold cobblestone with his robes torn off, getting fucked by him until he really couldn't take it anymore and passed out.

Afterwards, he didn't fully recover even after months of careful tending.

At that time, Mo Ran had said to him in a chilly tone: "Chu Wanning, from now on, you're forbidden from playing the guqin in front of others. Do you have any idea, the way you look when playing is so....."

He pressed his lips together, but couldn't find the right words, so he didn't finish the sentence.

It's so what?

It was clearly a serene, dignified look, but for some reason, it was so alluring as to destroy all of his self control.

Chu Wanning said nothing, lips pale and eyes closed, the set of his eyebrows stern.

Mo Ran raised a hand and hesitated for a second before touching the tightly knitted space between his brows. Taxian-Jun's gestures were almost gentle, but his voice was still cold and ruthless.

"If you don't listen, this venerable one will chain you to the bed, and then you won't be able to do anything but sleep with this venerable one. Don't think this venerable one won't do it."

And just how had Chu Wanning responded back then?

Mo Ran took another sip, watching the person on the stage, and continued his melancholic recollection.

He couldn't be sure; maybe he had said nothing.

Or maybe he had opened his eyes and coldly said——
“Get the hell out.”

He couldn't remember clearly anymore.
In that life, he had been entangled with Chu Wanning for so long that many things had become blurred at the edges.

Eventually, like a beast, he knew only one thing: Chu Wanning was his. Even if he didn't like him, he was still his to sunder and to ruin. He'd rather rip Chu Wanning apart with his own hands, bite through his ribcage and tear out his organs like a beast, than to allow someone else to touch him.

He wanted Chu Wanning's blood to course with his desire, his bones to bear his curse, and his body to be filled with his passion.

Wasn't he always so virtuous and untouchable?

And in the end? Didn't he still have to open his legs for the world's evilest villain, on the bed of the most ruthless tyrant, to have his life be taken by the man's fiery weapon. He defiled him, made him dirty, inside, outside, everywhere.

Shredded clothes weren't so easy to put back on.

Mo Ran closed his eyes, knuckles white, heart hammering.

Sunken deep into his memories, he could no longer hear the lively merriment of New Year's Eve festivities, or the soothing sounds of Chu Wanning's guqin.

All that remained in his mind was a callous, crazed voice, swooping back from the past and hovering like a vulture.

“Hell is too cold. Chu Wanning, I'll take you to the grave with me.”

“That's right, you're god, you're everyone's light, all of them, Xue Meng, Mei Hanxue, and all the common people are just waiting for you to shine on them. Chu-zongshi, how very saintly of you.” The voice laughed sweetly, laughed and laughed, until it suddenly became cruel, like a soul split in half, thundering, “But what about me! Have you ever shined on me! Ever given me any warmth? All you've ever given me were these scars on my body! How very saintly of you, Chu Wanning!”

“Your body is mine, and your life too. You want to be their fire, but I'll taking you to the grave with me, I'll make you shine on my dead body and nothing else. I want you to rot with me.”

“Living or dying won't be up to you.....”

Suddenly, there was a loud cheering and applause.

Mo Ran's eyes flew open. His back was drenched in a cold sweat.

The performance had ended, and all of the disciples were clapping enthusiastically. Sitting in the crowd, Mo Ran felt his vision pulsing and blurring, fading in and out. He watched Chu Wanning walk slowly down the wooden steps, holding a guqin made of paulownia wood.

In that moment, for the very first time in this life, he suddenly felt that it was all so absurd, that his past self must have been mad.

Chu Wanning wasn't actually a bad guy..... why was he even..... doing any of this?

He swallowed, feeling the burn of the alcohol down his throat, but feeling no less at a loss, exhausted and confused, until finally, he fell into a drunken oblivion.

Author's notes:

Mini theater 《Each Actor's Inner Thoughts》

Mo Weiyu: I feel like a lunatic in my past life, no matter how I look at the script from the director, I'm playing a psycho. This script is unbearable, but I have no choice but to obey.

Xue Meng: I feel like I'm a straight man, but the director actually made me cling onto Shizun for attention today. This script is unbearable, but I have no choice but to obey.

Shi Mei: I feel like A-Ran has changed, the director said the one he likes is me, but today he didn't even look at me. This script is unbearable, but I have no choice but to obey.

Chu Wanning: I feel like I don't want to act bed scenes, but the director said... I don't care what he said, drag him outside, beat him up, if he dies I'll take the fall. I'll let him know what it means to have no choice but to obey.

Ch.58 This Venerable One Feels a Little Hazy

Actually, Mo Ran could usually hold his liquor pretty well.

It was just that, on this night, in order to cover up his anxieties and fake a nonchalance he didn't feel, he downed five whole jars of pear blossom white wine, grinning the whole time, until his consciousness grew hazy.

When he was half-dragged, half-carried back to his room by Shi Mei and collapsed on the bed, Mo Ran's throat moved, wanting to call Shi Mei's name.

But habit was a frightful thing.

During all of those years in the past, the one by his side wasn't the moonlight of his heart, but the mosquito blood he was sick of looking at.

The name that came out of his mouth was that of the person he had always thought he hated.

"Chu Wanning....."

It came out all muddled.

"Wanning..... I....."

Shi Mei hesitated, then turned to look toward Chu Wanning, who was standing by the door. Chu Wanning had carried Xue Meng back to his room, and had just walked in, a bowl of sobering soup in hand, just in time to hear Mo Ran's murmuring.

After the initial surprise, he immediately convinced himself that he had misheard.

After all, Mo Ran had always called him Shizun. It was one thing if he called him Chu Wanning, but to call him Wanning——

He couldn't help remembering that night at the Red Lotus Pavilion, when they had slept holding one another, when Mo Ran, fast asleep, had clearly called out 'Wanning', and then pressed a kiss to his lips, light as the touch of a dragonfly on water.

Was it possible that, in Mo Ran's heart, there actually was a little bit of.....

He smothered that thought before it had time to take root.

Chu Wanning had always been straightforward and resolute. Except for matters of the heart, he knew well that he was a dawdling coward in those.

"Shizun." Shi Mei's bright eyes, unmatched in elegance, looked at him with uncertainty, "You....."

"Hm?"

".....Actually, it's nothing. Since Shizun is here to take care of A-Ran, I, I'll take my leave."

Chu Wanning spoke: "Wait."

"Does Shizun have any other instructions?"

Chu Wanning said: "You guys are leaving for the Peach Blossom Springs tomorrow?"

".....Mhm."

There wasn't much of an expression on Chu Wanning's face. A little while passed before he spoke again: "Go get some rest. Make sure to take care of one another out there, and——"

He paused, then said: "Come back soon."

Shi Mei left.

Chu Wanning walked to the bedside, face impassive as he propped Mo Ran up and fed him the sobering soup, spoonful by spoonful.

Mo Ran disliked the sour taste, and vomited it all back out not long after. But he did sober up a bit, opening his eyes and staring, half-awake, at Chu Wanning. He mumbled: "Shizun?"

"Mn. I'm here."

"Pfft." He started laughing for some reason, his laughter framed by dimples as he said, "Immortal-gege."

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran plonked right back out after that, sprawled out on his stomach.

Worried that he might catch a cold, Chu Wanning stayed by his side, pulling his blanket back up and tucking him in now and again.

Outside the room, many disciples were not yet asleep, staying up to count down to the New Year. Most of them were gathered inside in groups chattering and laughing, playing *pai gow*^[9], or putting on magic tricks.

When the hourglass hanging in front of Loyalty Hall finished trickling, signifying the changing of the year, the disciples rushed outside and began to set off fireworks and firecrackers, instantly filling the night sky with silvery flowers and branches of fire.

The deafening sounds from outside woke Mo Ran from his hazy sleep.

He cracked open an eye and pressed a hand to his throbbing temple, but the sight that greeted him was that of Chu Wanning sitting by his bedside, his handsome features composed and impassive. Seeing him awake, he said, lightly: "Did the noise wake you up?"

"Shizun....."

He woke up fully, startled despite himself.

Why was Chu Wanning the one keeping watch over him? Where was Shi Mei?

He didn't say anything in his sleep that he shouldn't have, did he?

Mo Ran snuck an apprehensive glance at Chu Wanning's face, and only let out the breath he was holding when it seemed that nothing was out of the ordinary.

The crackling sound of firecrackers continued outside. The two stared awkwardly at one another for a while.

Chu Wanning: "Do you want to go see the fireworks?"

Mo Ran: "Where's Shi Mei?"

Said at practically the same time.

It was already too late to take back anything.

Mo Ran's eyes opened wide, startled, and stared at him for a long while as if he didn't recognize him.

A moment passed in silence, and then Chu Wanning got up nonchalantly to leave, turning at the door to say: "Everyone's celebrating the New Year, so he's probably not asleep yet. You should go look for him."

It was only to be expected. He had such a terrible temper, after all. Even if he summoned up all of his courage to ask him to go watch the fireworks together, of course he would be rejected.

He shouldn't have asked, how humiliating.

Chu Wanning returned to the Red Lotus Pavilion and sat by himself beneath the haitang tree that bloomed year-round. There, alone, with a cloak draped over his shoulders, he watched the brilliant flowers blooming across the night sky.

In the distance, the disciple quarters were warmly lit, their cheerful laughter drifting over, but none of it had anything to do with him.

He should've gotten used to this long ago.

But for some reason, his chest felt all stuffy.

Maybe because seeing the merriment of others made it harder to return to his own solitude.

Quietly, he watched the fireworks bloom, one, two, listened to the voices of people wishing each other a happy new year, three, five.

Leaning against the tree, he closed his eyes, feeling a bit tired.

He wasn't sure how long had passed, but he suddenly felt an intrusion into the barriers.

His heart lurched, but he didn't dare open his eyes. He heard the sound of breathing, slightly winded, and those familiar footsteps, coming to a stop not far away.

The young man's voice carried a hint of hesitation.

"Shizun."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"I'll be leaving tomorrow."

"....."

"It's gonna be quite a while before I can come back."

"....."

"Actually, there's nothing going on tonight, and we have to get up early tomorrow, so I think Shi Mei probably went to bed already."

The sound of footsteps came nearer and stopped very close by.

Mo Ran said: "So, if you still want to, I....." he opened his mouth, but the rest of the sentence was swallowed by the bang of an especially large burst of fireworks.

Chu Wanning's eyelashes fluttered as he looked up. Backlit by the splendid river of stars in the night sky and the scattering of fire flowers like silvery frost, the handsome young man stood before him, pitying and a little bashful.

"....."

Chu Wanning had always been prideful. He didn't care for company born out of pity. But right now, looking at him, the words of refusal suddenly wouldn't come out.

Maybe the wine had gotten to him too.

Chu Wanning felt a sting in his chest, but also a warmth.

"Since you're already here, sit down with me." Then he added, softly, "I will watch with you."

He gazed up at the sky with an impassive expression, but the fingers hidden in his sleeves had curled up nervously. He didn't dare to look closely at the person beside him, fixing his eyes at the fireworks above instead, at the boundless night sky sprinkled with glittering brilliance.

Chu Wanning asked quietly: "Has everyone been well these days?"

"Mhm." Mo Ran replied, "We became friends with a cute little shidi, we mentioned in a letter to Shizun before. How is Shizun's injury?"

"It's nothing. Don't blame yourself."

A firework burst in the sky, scattering resplendently.

That night, fireworks and lanterns lit up the sky, firecrackers crackled nonstop, and the faint smell of smoke filled the snowy air. The two of them welcomed in the new year underneath the flowering tree; Chu Wanning was a man of few words, but Mo Ran looked for things to chat about, until he finally grew tired and fell asleep.

Early the next morning, Mo Ran woke up, still underneath the tree, with his head in Chu Wanning's lap and a hefty but soft fur cloak covering him. It was Chu Wanning's fire fox cloak, smooth and exquisitely-made.

A little startled, Mo Ran looked up to see Chu Wanning leaning against the trunk of the tree, deep in slumber. His long eyelashes drooped over his cheeks, quivering slightly with each breath like butterflies in the wind.

Did they really just sleep under the tree like this?

How did that even happen?

With Chu Wanning's compulsive nature, he should've gone back to his room to sleep no matter how tired he was. How could he have been willing to settle for just carelessly resting under the tree like this, and, this fur cloak.....

Did he cover him with it?

Mo Ran sat up, his ink-black hair a little disheveled. He stared, draped in Chu Wanning's cloak, a bit at a loss.

He wasn't that drunk last night. Although some things were a little blurry, he could more or less remember most of it.

Even running here to the Red Lotus Pavilion of his own accord to welcome in the new year together with Chu Wanning was a sober, conscious choice.

He had clearly hated this person, once, but when he heard him ask "do you want to go see the fireworks?", when he watched him turn around forlornly to leave with his head lowered.

He had actually felt an ache in his heart.....

He had thought that, they wouldn't see one another again for a long time anyway, he didn't really have much grievance toward him in this life, and Chu Wanning was so lonely, it was no big deal if he kept him company til the morning once in a while.

And so he brazenly came over.

Thinking back on it now, he felt like he was really too.....
Chu Wanning woke up before he could finish the thought.

Mo Ran stammered: "Shizun."

".....Mn." He rubbed his temple, his brows drawn slightly together from having just woken up, "You..... haven't left yet?"

"I-I just woke up."

Lately, for some reason, every time he saw Chu Wanning's impassive face, that silver tongue of his tied itself into a knot.

Mo Ran was stock-still for a moment before suddenly remembering that he was still wearing Chu Wanning's cloak. He hurriedly took it off and scrambled to wrap it around the other person instead.

While draping the cloak over his shoulders, Mo Ran noticed that although Chu Wanning wore several layers of clothing, it was still a bit thin without the cloak as the outer garment in all this snow.

The thought made his movements even more frantic, and he ended up tying his own finger into the knot while trying to fasten the tassel cord.

Mo Ran: "....."

Chu Wanning glanced at him and reached out to untie it, saying: "I'll do it myself."

".....Ok."

And, appended in a mumble: "Sorry."

"It's alright."

Mo Ran stood, and hesitated: "Shizun, I have to go pack and eat breakfast, and then I'll be setting out."

"Mn."

".....Would you like to go get breakfast together?" Pah! He wanted to bite his tongue and die right there right after saying that! The hell's wrong with him! What did he do that for!

Maybe he saw the regret that surfaced on Mo Ran's face right after asking that, but Chu Wanning paused, and then said: "I'll pass. You go ahead."

Mo Ran was deathly afraid that he might say something even more outrageous if he stayed any longer, so he said: "I-I'm going then....."

Chu Wanning: "Alright."

After Mo Ran left, Chu Wanning sat expressionlessly under the tree for a while longer before slowly getting up, with a hand on the trunk for support, but then didn't make any further movements.

His legs were completely numb from having served as Mo Ran's pillow all night; he couldn't walk at all with the pins and needles in them.

He stood there sullenly for a good while before his blood circulation returned to normal, and he could finally hobble his way back inside.

Sure enough, after spending the night outside in such bitterly cold weather, even with the haitang tree shielding them from the snow, he still ended up catching a cold.

"Achool!"

He sneezed, the corners of his eyes already reddening.

Covering his nose with a handkerchief, Chu Wanning thought, *dammit..... I probably..... caught a cold.....*

Yuheng Elder.

The owner of three holy weapons, and the number one great zongshi most sought after by all the sects of the cultivation world. The mere sight of Tianwen tamed the four seas, the white of his robes bested all the colors of the world.

Such an impressive character, he could even be said to be the strongest cultivator of the era.

Unfortunately, even the strongest person was bound to have a weakness. Chu Wanning's weakness was that he couldn't handle the cold, and would easily fall sick if exposed. Thus, when Mo Ran and Shi Mei set off from Sisheng Peak, not only had Chu-zongshi turned small again from the pill wearing off, but on top of that, he was also sneezing and sniffling nonstop.

And so, when the feathered tribe arrived at noon to escort them, they were met with Xue Meng, Mo Ran, and Shi Mei, who were perfectly healthy, and a pitiful little shidi "Xia Sini" who could not stop sneezing.

Author's Notes:

Mini Theater 《The Correct Way to Competitive Drinking Against Yuheng Elder》

Xue Meng: Shizun, Shizun! I wish you prosperity like the eastern sea, longevity like southern mountains, bottoms up! Gulp gulp...

Chu Wanning: Okay, drink.

After one cup, Xue Meng, flat on the ground.

Shi Mei: Shizun, I'll join in and drink with you, bottoms up.

Chu Wanning: Okay, drink.

Shi Mei: Shizun, one more cup.

Chu Wanning: Okay, drink.

Shi Mei: Shizun, one more....

Chu Wanning: Okay, drink.

Shi Mei: Shizun...

After four cups, Shi Mei, flat on the ground.

Mo Ran: Shizun, Happy New Years, bottom up.

God of Alcohol Chu Wanning: Okay, drink.

Mo Ran: Drink what?

Chu Wanning: Alcohol? Didn't you say bottoms up?

Mo Ran: (Brightly smiles) Yeah, bottom up, your bottom.

Ch.59 This Venerable One Is Only So Simple

There was nothing for it; even if the little shidi couldn't stop sneezing, they still had to get going. The feathered tribe led them eastward, to a port on the Yangtze River. They summoned a self-navigating ferry, and, with a barrier shielding the vessel, set off to sea.

That night was the first time Mo Ran got to spend time with Shi Mei on an outing without Shizun around, but strangely, he didn't seem to feel as excited as

he thought he would.

Xue Meng and Xia Sini had already gone to bed. Mo Ran lay alone on the deck, arms folded behind his head, looking up at the starry sky.

Shi Mei came out from the cabin with some of the dried fish they had bought from fishermen earlier and sat down next to Mo Ran. The two of them nibbled idly at the snack while chatting.

"A-Ran, since we're going to the Peach Blossom Springs, we might not make it to the Spiritual Mountain Competition. It doesn't matter much for me, but you and the young master are both so strong, won't you regret it if you miss out on the chance to make a big debut?"

Mo Ran turned his head with a smile: "It doesn't matter, stuff like reputation and whatnot are just words, but going to the Peach Blossom Springs and learning real, useful skills to protect those important to me, that's what's important."

Shi Mei's gaze seemed to smile, and he said gently: "That you would think this way, Shizun would be so happy if he knew."

"And what about you? Are you happy?"

"Of course I'm happy too."

Waves crashed against the ferry, the wooden vessel rocking in the sea.

Mo Ran stared at Shi Mei for a while from where he was lying on his side. He wanted to tease him a bit, but then didn't know what to say. In his eyes, Shi Mei was pure and unattainable.

Maybe it was because of this purity that he found it difficult to have any of the lewd thoughts he had towards Chu Wanning when faced with Shi Mei.

Mo Ran spaced out for a while.

Shi Mei noticed that he was being stared at. He turned, tucking the stray strands of hair blown by the sea breeze behind a ear, and smiled: "What is it?"

Mo Ran flushed and turned his head away: "Nothing."

He was originally planning to use this outing as a chance to confess—carefully—to Shi Mei. But every time the words were at his lips, he couldn't open his mouth.

Confession.

And then?

Mo Ran couldn't be rough or forceful toward this pure, gentle person,. He was afraid of rejection, but even if his feelings were returned, he was afraid he wouldn't know how to act toward Shi Mei.

After all, he really did perform quite terribly during the short time they got to spend together in the last life..... other than that one moment of intimacy inside the ghost mistress's illusion, he never even kissed him.

And not to mention, after what happened in this lifetime, he couldn't even be sure if that person in the illusion back then was Shi Mei or Chu Wanning anymore.

Shi Mei was still smiling: "But you really do look like you want to say something to me though."

For an impulsive moment, Mo Ran wanted to just poke heedlessly through the thin layer of paper on the window.[\[10\]](#)

But, for some reason, a figure dressed in white, with a face that didn't like to smile, flashed suddenly through his mind, a figure that always kept to himself, that looked so lonely.

All of a sudden, it was like his throat had closed off, and he couldn't speak anymore.

Mo Ran turned back to stare at the night sky full of stars.

A while passed before he said, quietly: "Shi Mei, you're really very important to me."

"Mn. I know. You're the same to me."

Mo Ran continued: "Did you know? I had a nightmare once, and in it you..... you weren't there anymore. I was so sad."

Shi Mei smiled: "You're so silly sometimes."

Mo Ran: "..... I'll definitely protect you."

"Okay, then I'll just have to thank my good shidi first."

Mo Ran's heart caught, and he couldn't help saying: "I....."

Shi Mei asked in a soft voice: "Was there something else you wanted to say?"

The ferry shook, and the sound of the waves seemed louder somehow. Shi Mei looked at him quietly, as if waiting for him to say those last few words.

But Mo Ran closed his eyes: "It's nothing. Why don't you go back inside and get some sleep? It's cold at night."

"....." Shi Mei was quiet for a moment before he said, "What about you?"

Mo Ran was quite dim sometimes: "I.....I'm gonna watch the stars for a while longer, feel the breeze on my face."

Shi Mei didn't move. It was a while before he smiled: "Alright, then I'll go ahead. Don't stay up too late yourself."

Then he turned and left.

Beneath the boundless sky sky, the ferry sailed through the sea.

That guy lying on its deck had no idea what he had just missed; he was even a bit absent-minded as he tried to dig out just what it was that he really felt in the depths of his heart. He thought about it for a long time, but he really was dim-witted, and so, even by the time the morning sun painted the eastern skies a soft white, he still hadn't figured anything out.

He spent every waking moment with Shi Mei, and the feelings between them were deep and sincere. Mo Ran had thought that he would definitely want to confess to Shi Mei as soon as they were alone, unable to wait another moment. But when the ferry reached the end of the bridge, he found that that wasn't the case at all. Maybe it was because he thought he was too clumsy, that if he were to go and rashly confess to Shi Mei right then, he'd definitely startle him, or, even if he didn't, it still wouldn't make for a good start.

He was more used to this hazy vagueness between Shi Mei and himself. Sometimes his heart would flutter, he would reach out and take Shi Mei's hand as if without thought, and his chest would overflow with honey-sweet tenderness.

It was such a natural feeling that he didn't really want to immediately shatter it.

It was late by the time he went back inside the cabin, and everyone had already gone to sleep. Mo Ran lay on the sleeping mat, staring at the night outside the narrow skylight. Slowly, Chu Wanning's figure appeared before his eyes, sometimes silent with his eyes closed, sometimes with a severe expression on his face.

Of course, he also thought about the way that person looked when he was curled up, asleep, lonely and unassuming, like a haitang blossom that nobody cared for because it had bloomed too high up on the branch.

Putting aside the hatred, Chu Wanning's entanglement with him in the last life truly was deeper than that of anyone else in this world.

He had taken many firsts from Chu Wanning, regardless of whether he was willing.

His first kiss, his first time cooking, his first time crying.

And his first time.

Dammit, just thinking about it made his body feel hot and his blood rush downwards.

And, in exchange, he had given Chu Wanning some of his firsts as well, regardless of whether he wanted them.

His first time becoming an apprentice, his first time coaxing someone, his first time giving flowers.

His first time being thoroughly disappointed.

And the first stirrings of his heart.

Yes, the first stirrings of his heart.

When he came to Sisheng Peak, the first person he fell for wasn't Shi Mei, but Chu Wanning.

That day, under the haitang tree, that white-robed young man was so beautiful, so focused, that it only took one glance for Mo Ran to decide that he wanted this person to be his master, that no one else would do.

But just when did it all change?

Just when did the one he cared about become Shi Mei, and the one he hated, Shizun.....

He had thought about it a lot during the last couple of months. It probably began with that misunderstanding.

That was the first time he had gotten lashed by Chu Wanning as punishment. The fifteen year old boy stumbled back to his room, bruised and battered, and curled up alone on his bed, eyes rimmed red, choking back sobs. The wounds on his back had hurt less than the cold expression on Shizun's face when he brought Tianwen down without a thread of mercy, like hitting a stray dog.

It was true that he had stolen a haitang flower from the medicine garden, but he had no idea how precious that haitang had been, nor how carefully Madam Wang had tended to it for the last five years for one to finally bloom.

The only thing he knew was that, walking home at night that day, a luminous white at the tip of a branch had caught his eyes.

The flower's petals were clear and frosty, its fragrance mild and delicate.

He tilted his head back to admire it, thinking of his Shizun. There was a throbbing in his heart for some reason, and even the tips of his fingers felt warm. Before he realized it, he had already plucked the flower, carefully and with the gentlest of movements, afraid of accidentally shaking off even a single drop of dew from the petals.

Through the thick curtain of his eyelashes, he gazed at that dew-laden haitang blossom under the light of the moon. In that moment, he did not yet know just how pure the tenderness and affection he held for Chu Wanning was, nor did he know that, after that day—for the next ten years, twenty years, until death—he would never have it again.

Before he could give the flower to Shizun, he bumped into Xue Meng who had come to pick medicinal herbs for his mother.

The young master dragged him to Shizun in a rage. Chu Wanning turned from his scroll, his gaze ice-cold as he listened. He shot a glance at Mo Ran, and asked if he had an explanation.

Mo Ran started: "I picked the flower because I wanted to give it to....."
He was still holding onto that haitang, with specks of frost and drops of dew still clinging to its freshly bloomed petals, frosty yet indescribably beautiful.
But Chu Wanning's gaze was too cold, so cold that it chilled the lava-like heat in his chest.

He could no longer say the word "you."

That feeling was all too familiar to him. Before he was brought to Sisheng Peak, back when he had to scamper between songstresses and customers, shrinking into his thin, undernourished body to appear smaller and less obstructive, he had spent every day under that kind of gaze——

That kind of contempt, that kind of disdain.....
A shudder ran through him.

Could it be that Shizun actually looked down on him?

In the face of Chu Wanning's ice-cold interrogation, Mo Ran felt his heart freeze over. He lowered his head and said, quietly: ".....I.....have nothing to say."

And the rest was history.

Just because of this haitang flower, Chu Wanning lashed him until all of his initial fondness shattered into pieces, forty strikes in all.

At that time, if only Mo Ran had just explained a little more, if only Chu Wanning had just asked a little more, then maybe things wouldn't have turned out the way that they did, maybe the master and disciple wouldn't have taken that first step on the road beyond redemption.

But there weren't that many what-if's.

It was at this point that Shi Mei, warm and gentle, appeared at his side.
After returning from Chu Wanning's place, Mo Ran didn't go eat, didn't even light a lamp, only lay curled up on his bed.

This stiff figure curled up in the darkness was the sight that greeted Shi Mei when he opened the door. He set the bowl of chili oil wontons in his hands gently on the table, then walked over to the bed and called, softly: "A-Ran?"

Mo Ran did not yet have any particular feelings toward Shi Mei at that time. He didn't even turn around, still staring at the wall with red, swollen eyes, and his voice was hoarse when he said:

"Get out."

"I brought you some....."

"I said get out."

"A-Ran, don't be like that."

"....."

"Shizun has a bad temper, but it just takes a little getting used to. Come, get up and eat something."

But Mo Ran was stubborn like a donkey, immovable even if dragged by ten whole horses.

"Don't want it. I'm not hungry."

".....At least have a bite, if you don't eat, Shizun will get ma——" Mo Ran shot up from bed before he could even finish the sentence, his watery eyes angry and indignant, quivering slightly beneath his lashes.

"Mad? What would he even be mad about? It's my body, how is it any of his business whether I eat or not? He doesn't even want me as a disciple anyway, I might as well just starve to death, less hassle for him, he'll be happier that way."

Shi Mei: "....."

He hadn't expected his words to touch on Mo Ran's sore point like this, and was at a loss for a while, staring helplessly at the little shidi in front of him.

A long moment passed. Mo Ran pulled himself together and looked down, long hair covering half his face.

Mo Ran: ".....Sorry."

Shi Mei couldn't see his face, only the subdued trembling of his shoulders and the veins on the back of his tightly clenched fists.

But the fifteen year old boy was still too young, after all. He tried to hold it in for a while, but couldn't in the end; burying his face into his arms, he curled into himself and bawled miserably, voice rough and broken, hysterical and lost, pained and grief-stricken.

Body wracked with sobs, he repeated the same thing over and over——

"I only wanted to have a home..... these fifteen years, I really..... I really only wanted a home..... why do you all look down on me..... why do you all look at me like that..... why, why do you all look down on me....."

He cried for a long time, and Shi Mei sat with him for a long time.

When Mo Ran had cried enough, Shi Mei handed him a spotless handkerchief, then brought the bowl of now-cold wontons over.

Gently, he said: "Don't say silly things like starving to death anymore. You came to Sisheng Peak and apprenticed under Shizun, so you are my shidi. I also lost my parents when I was young, so if you want, I'll be your family. Come now, eat something."

"....."

"I made these wontons. Even if you won't give Shizun any face, at least give me some, hm?" Shi Mei's lips curled into a small smile as he scooped up a plump, translucent wonton and held it to Mo Ran's lips, "Try one."

The rims of Mo Ran's eyes were still red. Those watery eyes stared at the person by his bed, but he finally opened his mouth and allowed that gentle person to feed him.

Truth be told, that bowl of wontons had already gone cold and been soaked for too long, so it was no longer as good as it could've been.

But, in that moment, under the candle light, this bowl of wontons, that incomparably beautiful face, and those gentle eyes were carved deeply into his heart. In life and in death, never to be forgotten.

It probably began that night.

His hatred toward Shizun grew ever deeper. And that was also when he became convinced that Shi Mei was the most important person in his life.

After all, everyone wanted warmth.

Especially a stray dog that had frozen in the bitter cold so many times that the mere sight of salted roads made him tremble in anticipation of snow, of the coming of winter.

Taxian-Jun looked imposing, but only he himself knew the truth.

That he was nothing but a wandering stray. A stray that had always been looking for a place he could curl up at, a place to call "home", but he spent fifteen years looking and still he couldn't find it.

And so, his love and hate became laughably simple—
If someone gave him a beating, he would hate that person.
If someone gave him a bowl of soup, he would love that person.

He was only so simple, after all.

✿ https://seven771.lofter.com/post/2631b4_1c5e19095

[1] This rhymes in Chinese, Your highness- dian xia | Your majesty - bi xia | Come, Gege has a smoochie - lai, gege qin yi xia

[2] Little brother

[3] Chinese is a highly contextual language and many characters are pronounced the same, so usually you use the character in a word to specify which one it is. Here CWN essentially bullshits XM with "Si like a disciple named Si, Ni like a disciple named Ni" and XM just accepts it,

[4] 萌萌 chinese equivalent of 'moemoe'

[5] Reference to two deities who reward the good and punish the bad, 黑白无常 (one of them is clothed in white and the other is clothed in black.)

[6] 阳春白雪/the spring snows reference in the girls' nicknames is supposed to be a fancy ancient song from the warring states period from the state of Chu or smth so a ref to shizuns name?? Also miss meatbun makes a reference to 西子 is another name for 西施 who is supposed to be one of the four legendary beauties of ancient cn??? so essentially this reference is comparing shizun to one of the 4 famous beauties of ancient cn/saying he's very beautiful, could sway emperors with his beauty ;^)

[7] 朱雀 Vermillion Bird/Phoenix, one of four mythical beasts

[8] 桃花源 a hidden land of peace and prosperity

[9] A domino game

[10] Windows in ancient china were either open or lined with paper; in this case, the window paper is a metaphor for something known by both parties but that neither wants to say, the paper being easily breakable yet remaining intact until poked through

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.60 This Venerable One Discovers a Secret

With spells casted on the ferry, the travel was fast, and by the next morning they had already reached the Port of Yangzhou. There were already envoys at the harbour receiving them, stabling many of the horses.

The party ate breakfast at the harbour, but since the feathered tribe didn't require sustenance, they sat by the edge of the harbour with their eyes closed, resting their spirits. Dawn had only just broken then, and there weren't many merchants around conducting business, but the deck hands had all risen already, gathering together in threes and fives together chowing down porridge and steamed buns, peeking and stealing curious glances at them from time to time.

Bits and pieces of talk from those beefy men in simple labour robes as they chewed their meal fell in Mo Ran's ears.

"Aye aye, I recognize their clothes. They're people of the Lower Cultivation Realm."

"The Lower Cultivation Realm is so far away, and our sect rarely interacts with them, so how would you know?"

"Just look at the coat of arms on their vambraces. Isn't it exactly the same as those on the Holy Night Guardian?"

"You're talking about those wooden devices that expel evil?" Someone took a glance at Xue Meng's sleeve, and exclaimed in awe as he chewed the pickles crunchily, "Aiyoh, it's true. Who was the one that made the Holy Night Guardians again?"

"I heard it was Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak who made it."

"Who's Yuheng Elder? Is he as powerful as our Sect Leader Jiang of Guyue'ye?"

"Hehe, who knows. Who's to say anything about the world of cultivators."

The deck hands spoke with a heavy Su dialect and Mo Ran couldn't quite comprehend, but Chu Wanning could understand what those people were saying. Learning that the Holy Night Guardians that he had invented was now successfully being distributed throughout the common world, he couldn't help but feel comforted. Thus, he started plotting mentally, thinking that after they return he should invent more lighter-gearred wooden oxen or horses, and do more good.

Once breakfast was done, the group took haste, and it didn't take four hours before they had reached the foot of Mount JiuHua. It was still early in the day, the sun of a winter's day had only just reached its peak, and millions of golden light threads came kissing down like silk, sinking the snowy summit in a crystal luminescence, glittering magnificently. Upon the slopes of the summit were hundreds of luscious ancient pines that remained evergreen, standing resolutely in the frost, much like a hermit cultivator with an immortal air, sleeves lowered eyes half-lidded, deadly silent as they stood on either side of the mountain path.

It wasn't for nothing that the mortals called the summit of Mount JiuFeng the "Unmortal World".

The feathered tribe whistled thrice at the foot of the mountain, and a little golden canary with vibrantly charming feathers came flying out of the white, snowy piedmont, and landed lightly before them. The group followed the golden canary's lead, heading west the entire way, and came before a curtain of turbulent and tempestuous waterfall.

"Will my lord cultivators please step back."

The leader of the feathered tribe stood in front, her hand imitating the hand of Buddha, and she silently recited a spell. Suddenly, she pursed her scarlet lips, and gently blew into the wind. Shockingly, a beam of flames appeared in midair, lunging straight for the waterfall, dividing the water curtain into half!

The feathered tribe breezily turned around and smiled, "I sincerely invite my lords to step into the Peach Blossoms Spring."

They followed after the feathered tribe and passed through the water curtain. After crossing the barrier, the scenery suddenly brightened before their eyes. This place was vast without an end in sight, but bustling and lively like the other world. The Peach Blossom Springs was a sheltered world without many connections to the cultivation world, and while it couldn't be compared to the real Land of the Immortals, nevermind spoken of as equals, nonetheless this land was rich with spiritual chi. Within the Springs, the sceneries were as if they came out of poetry and paintings, the colours elegant and delicate, and after having walked for a while, they discovered the changing of seasons was randomized too.

With the feathered tribe leading the way, they first passed through the wilderness, and the sound of the coursing rivers roared in their ears, the cries of apes and beasts on either shores. Then they came to the outskirts of the city, and saw vast farmlands of crisscrossing field paths, the wheat swaying along with the breeze. Finally, when they had entered the city fortress, there were immaculate and detailed buildings as far as the eye could see, the eaves tall and grand.

The main capital of this Peach Blossoms land was magnificent and beautiful, the city itself grand, its provisions complete, not appearing any less than the lively city centres of the mortal realm. Only, falling blossoms and drifting snowflakes danced together in the air, rare birds and immortal herons took flight together in flocks, and all the feathered tribe folks who passed by were neck tall and handsome, their figures picturesque and breezy, each looking like unparalleled fairies who emerged from paintings.

However, while such an ethereal scene appeared rather new and interesting for Xue Meng and company, but since they had already witnessed the bizarre sight of Jincheng Lake, this was no longer anything that'd shock them.

They came to a fork in the road, and saw a feathered tribe folk donned in a grand feathered coat embroidered with a gold phoenix and a pure white under layer standing upright by an ancient tree, so tall it reached the skies. That flame mark on her forehead was much deeper than any of the others, signalling that her powers were far greater than the other feathered tribe.

The envoys leading the way brought the group of them before her, then bent one knee to the ground, bowing their respects, "Great Immortal Lord, the four xianjun of ShiSeng Peak have come."

"Thank you for your hard work, you may stand down."

"Yes, milord."

The feathered tribe folk who was beautifully dressed smiled softly, her voice clear and affecting like the crowing of a young phoenix.

"I am named Eighteen. By the recognition from the immortal elder of my family, I was given the grand title of Great Immortal Lord in the Peach Blossoms Springs. We are much thankful that my lords are willing to show us the courtesy of coming to train in this humble abode. Should xianjun find any inadequate reception in the duration of your stay here, please do forgive us and do not be afraid to let us know."

Such beauty, and such grace when she spoke, she certainly gave a good impression.

Although Xue Meng didn't enjoy men who looked better than him, he was nevertheless at an age where he was beginning to know beauty and affections, so naturally he didn't dismiss ladies so beautiful it was as if they emerged from paintings. Thus, he smiled in response, "Xianjun is too kind, but this name Eighteen certainly is odd. May I inquire for xianjun's family name?"

Eighteen replied gently and courteously, "I have no family name. Eighteen is it."

Mo Ran laughed heartily, "If you're called Eighteen, then is there someone here named Seventeen?"

That was meant to be a joke, but who knew when Eighteen heard him, she grinned in spite of herself, "Xianjun is wise. Seventeen is my sister."

Mo Ran: "....."

Eighteen explained, "We feathered tribe are born from the fallen down feathers of the Heavenly God Zhuque. When our cultivation was still shallow, we often appear in the form of a crested ibis. The one to form an appearance first was the elder immortal of my family, and the rest of the feathered tribe are thus named in order of forming appearances, starting with One, Two... I am the eighteenth one, and so I am named Eighteen."

"....."

After Mo Ran heard he fell speechless. He had originally thought Xue Zhengyong was already horrible at giving names, but he hadn't thought there was one who was even worse here —going by numbers directly.

Then, Eighteen said something that made him even more thunderstruck.

"Come. Let's get down to business. This is the first time you have come to this place, and you're not yet familiar with the training rules of the Peach Blossoms Springs." Eighteen said, "In the mortal realm, for centuries, cultivation has been divided by schools and sects. This place is different. We feathered tribe have always been very clear in dividing work. There are those who specialize in 'Defense', those who specialize in 'Attack', and those who specialize in 'Healing'. There are three divisions in all, and your training will also be conducted thus accordingly."

Mo Ran smiled, "That's brilliant."

Eighteen nodded towards him, "Thank you for thinking so, little xianjun. The cultivators from Guyue'ye also came by several days ago, and when they heard about this training method, they were all quite displeased."

Mo Ran felt incredulous, "Defense is defense, attack is attack, and healing is healing. Isn't such a clean division a good thing? What are they unhappy

about?"

"You see," Eighteen replied, "There is a young master Duan from Guyue'ye who belonged in 'Defense', and needed to reside with the other xianjun of the same division. But, his Shijie belonged to 'Attack', and must train and live with the xianjun of the Attack Division. While I don't quite understand the affections and relations of mortalkind, but I could still tell that young master wasn't willing to be separated from his sworn sister."

"Haha, what's up with th—wait, what did you say?!" Mo Ran stopped laughing halfway through when it suddenly dawned on him, and his eyes widened, "Not only do those who belonged in different divisions have to train separately, they have to live apart too?"

Eighteen didn't know why his face suddenly changed and replied in confusion, "That's right."

Mo Ran's entire face turned blue, "....."

What kind of joke was this?!

An hour later, Mo Ran, who had failed in his bargaining with Eighteen, stood dumbfoundedly before a bright and spacious little four sided courtyard residence, and sank into a long, deep silence.

Him, Xue Meng, and Xia Sini belonged in the Attack division, and were sent to the east side of the Peach Blossoms Springs. By 'east side', it wasn't just any small allotted land, but the place where all the xianjun who belonged in 'Attack' lived. There were already more than twenty some of those courtyard residences that housed four, and there were also mountains and lakes, streets and markets, built very much similar to those of the mortal realm. It seemed it was because the feathered tribe knew they were going to live here for a long time, so it was built thus to help them rid of their homesickness.

As for Shi Mei, since he belonged to 'Healing', he was sent to the south side of the Peach Blossoms Springs. It was exceptionally far from where Mo Ran and the others lived, and there was even a barrier set up in between that could only be traversed through with the Authority Staff. This meant, while Mo Ran and Shi Mei were both inside the Peach Blossoms Springs, other than the daily gathering of all three divisions to learn the beginner's cultivation method of the feathered tribe, there was basically no other chances for them to see each other.

This wasn't even the worst of it either.

Mo Ran suddenly looked up, and gazed towards the courtyard through his thick curtains of lashes at the Xue Meng who was circling all over the yard, obviously planning on picking the most comfortable room for himself. Mo Ran could feel the veins on his forehead pop in spite of himself.

Xue Meng...

That's right. Fucking hell. From today onwards, he would have to live in the same courtyard as Xue Meng everyday! Perhaps for the next long while, he would have to thoroughly experience two of the eight great sufferings of life: the separation from loved ones and the meeting of enemies....

The feathered tribe had been going from the Upper Cultivation Realm to the Lower Cultivation Realm to find their chosen ones, and by the time they reached SiSeng Peak, they were already at the end of their journey. Thus, those sent from all the other sects had already settled in before them, and Xue Meng soon discovered that one of the rooms of their little four sided courtyard was already occupied.

"Weird. I wonder who's settled in here." Xue Meng mumbled as he glanced at the blanket being hung to dry in the yard.

"No matter who it is, it shouldn't be anyone who'd make much fuss." Mo Ran said.

"What do you mean?"

"Let me ask you," Mo Ran said, "Which room did you pick?"

Xue Meng immediately looked cautious, "What are you planning? I've already made my choice, the one sitting in the north facing south is mine. If you're gonna fight me for it, then I'll..."

He hadn't yet figured out what he was going to do before Mo Ran cut him off laughingly, "I don't like rooms that are too big, so I won't fight with you. But let me ask you, if this residence was still empty—" He said, and pointed at the little room that someone had already moved into, and continued his query, "Would you change with him?"

Xue Meng looked at that simple little thatched cottage first before glaring at Mo Ran, "Do you think I'm dumb? Of course I won't change."

Mo Ran laughed, "That's why I said that person isn't someone who'd make a fuss. See, when he came, all four rooms in this courtyard are empty, but he didn't pick the best one, and only chose that short, little hovel. If this man isn't a fool, then he's a humble gentleman."

"....."

This analysis certain wasn't wrong, but Xue Meng felt like his face was ripped open by the hidden knife in Mo Ran's smile. The other man was a gentleman, leaving the best room to sleep in a dilapidated hut, then wasn't he a stinking, vulgar, common man, a petty cheapskate?

But Mo Ran didn't call Xue Meng out by name, so Young Master Xue couldn't yell back, nor could he endure it, so in the moment, his entire face flushed red.

"Either way... I'm used to living well." Xue Meng choked in resentment and rebuked with a dark face, "I can't stand rundown places in any case, so whoever wants to be a gentleman can go right ahead. I don't care."

Having made his statement, he turned and left.

Thus, the four different styled rooms of the courtyard residence were all taken by different masters.

Xue Meng chose the exquisite residence in the north, the walls pale and the shingles black, the threshold lined with gold; the most luxurious room. Mo Ran picked the stone cottage on the west, a peach tree planted by the entrance, the flowers at the height of their blossoming. As for Chu Wanning, he asked for the bamboo building on the east side, and when the sun sank at dusk on the west, the tender, gentle bamboos were like illuminated crisp, bright jades.

And on the south side, that humble, simple thatched cottage resided that 'gentleman' they had yet to meet.

Chu Wanning's cold wasn't yet healed, and his head was spinning crazily, so he had gone to rest quite early. Xue Meng stayed with him for a bit, but since this little ShiDi didn't snuggle or whine, nor did he cared to listen to stories, wrapping himself up like a little sticky rice ball and only cared to sleep in muffled peace,

Xue Meng sat on the edge of his bed for a little while before he found himself unneeded, and dusted himself off and left.

In the yard, Mo Ran had pulled a chair out and was just putting his legs up, his arms pillowng behind his head as he watched the golden sun sink in the west and the blazing rays peel away in leisure.

Seeing Xue Meng come out, he asked, "Xia-Shidi is asleep now?"

"En."

"Has his fever gone down?"

"If you care about him, why don't you go inside and see for yourself?"

Mo Ran laughed heartily, "The little guy probably isn't deep asleep yet, my clumsiness might rouse him."

Xue Meng gave him a look, "Well at least you're aware of yourself. And here I thought you're just like the cats and dogs mom raised, and only knew how to chill out in the yard and be lazy."

"Haha, and how do you know I'm being lazy?" Mo Ran twiddled with a peach blossom between his fingers, and looked up with a smile, "The time I spent here sitting in the yard was enough to discover a shocking, major secret."

Xue Meng obviously didn't want to ask, but was still curious nonetheless, and after bearing it in for a good while, with his face still stiff, he worked out an expression of indifference before he muttered, "...What major secret?"

Mo Ran waved at him and squinted his eyes, "Bring your ear closer and I'll tell you in secret."

"....." Incredibly unwilling, Xue Meng lowered his gracious ear over. Mo Ran pressed close, and chuckled quietly, "Hehe, got you. Dumb Meng Meng."

Xue Meng's eyes bulged in round circles and immediately exploded in outrage, yanking over Mo Ran's collar, "YOU LIED TO ME? HOW JUVENILE ARE YOU?!"

Mo Ran laughed, "How have I lied? I did discover a secret, but I also didn't want to tell you, that's all."

Xue Meng's dark brows hardened, "If I continue to believe you then I'm truly a fool!"

The two bickered like a bird pecking a dog and a dog biting a bird, and Mo Ran was just about to teasingly say something else to provoke the other to get even angrier when suddenly, a foreign voice laced with confusion from behind went "En?" before speaking, "Are the two of you new training peers?"

This man's voice was clear and crisp, more supple and bright than your average youth.

Mo Ran and Xue Meng both turned their heads back, and saw in the crimson blood red of the remnant sun, a man dressed in a tight suit was standing there against the wind.

This man was born with deep features, his brows inky black, a black jaded hair crown fastened atop his head, and his honey-colored face was both handsome and spirited. While his body wasn't tall or buff, his figure was exceedinging commanding, more esteemed than those distinguished and with

class. Especially those pair of long legs: with the bindings of a tight black suit, they appeared even more shapely and powerful, straight and gallant.

Mo Ran's expression instantly changed, and it felt like the blood and sins of a separate world flashed before his eyes.

It was as if he saw a silhouette kneeling in the tempest of blood, the collarbones shot through with a steel chain^[1], flesh on half the face ripped away but would rather die than surrender, refusing to yield.

His heart trembled, like a crystal dew drop that dripped from a leaf, and Mo Ran actually couldn't describe what it was he was feeling.

If there was anyone he had respected and admired in his previous life, then the one before his eyes now was definitely one of them.

So the honorable gentleman who was to live with them... was actually him, huh...

Author's Notes:

First day of school, Mo Weiyu  came to Mount JiuHua Bird Folk University and is living in a four person dorm room~

Mo Ran: Hi everybody! I'm Mo Weiyu from HuNan XinTang! I'm studying philosophy! Please take care of me!

Chu Wanning: Chu Wanning, I came from Lin'an. That pile of laundry on the balcony is mine, I'll throw them all into the washing machine and wash them later at night. But I don't know how to stuff my duvet covers, if anyone could help me with that, thanks.

Mo Ran:

Xue Meng: Xue Ziming, SiChuan, do not provoke me. The entire lower cultivation world's economic backbone is under my dad's hands, if any of you dare to bully me, my dad can ruin the stocks of your parents hold.

Mo Ran:

Meanwhile —

The dorm room's door opened! The dorm leader came back from washing mosquito nets in the laundry room!!

Then, from the side character roster, is he Mei Hanxue, or is he Ye Wangxi? This is an easy question~

Ch.61 This Venerable One Is Really Great?

The two brothers stopped bickering, and rose to their feet at the same time. The person in front of them had an extremely distinguished air about him. Xue Meng stared for a moment before he finally reacted, nodding. "Mn. That's right. Who are you?"

Xue Meng had been headstrong since birth, and even though Madam Wang taught him etiquette over and over again, he never took it to heart. So, he never asked for people's proper courtesy names, didn't bother with honorifics, and wouldn't give out his own name, either. He was, in essence, downright rude.

But Mo Ran knew that this person was too dignified to make a scene at such actions. After all, this was.....

"I am a disciple of the Rufeng Sect, Ye Wangxi." As expected, the young man was calm and composed, and didn't get angry. Below his dark, black eyebrows were a pair of eyes that shone like scattered starlight, exceptionally bright and piercing. "May I inquire as to your name?"

"Ye Wangxi?" Xue Meng frowned, muttering. "Never heard of him, must not have much of a reputation."

His mutters weren't loud, but the only way the other wouldn't be able to hear him would be if he was hard of hearing. Thus, Mo Ran discreetly tugged on Xue Meng's sleeve to get him to hold back a bit, then masked the emotions on his own face and smiled lightly. "I'm Mo Ran, a disciple from Sisheng Peak, and the one beside me is my ill-mannered little brother, Xue Meng."

Xue Meng pulled away from him, throwing him an angry glare.
"Don't touch me, who's your little brother?!"

"Oh, Xue Meng, you....." Mo Ran sighed. He turned to Ye Wangxi, eyes curving up into crescents and smiling. "My younger brother is a bit stubborn, please don't mind him, Ye-xiong."

It wasn't that he suddenly decided to change his entire attitude and start being courteous about Xue Meng. Rather, it was because Ye Wangxi was an outstanding genius among his peers. Although this Ye Wangxi hadn't made a name for himself yet, in his previous life, Ye Wangxi was second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world.

Heaven knows how much Mo Ran had suffered at Ye Wangxi's hands in his previous life. After being reborn into this life, seeing as the other was still sharp as a knife's edge, an upright hero pure and noble.....even if he couldn't get into his good graces, at the very least, Mo Ran didn't want to be his enemy again.

Just Chu Wanning alone was enough to beat him black and blue. How would he even be able to live in peace if Ye Wangxi was added to the mix?

Ye Wangxi was a man of few words, so after a few polite words, he returned to his own room.

As soon as he left, Mo Ran's expression returned to his annoying-as-hell, shit-eating grin. "What do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

"That person," Mo Ran replied. "Like him? Think he's good-looking?"

".....?" Xue Meng looked at him like he was out of his mind and scoffed.
"Weirdo."

Mo Ran laughed. "The four of us are living in the same courtyard, we'll run into each other around every corner. You should be glad that he's the one we're living with."

Xue Meng was puzzled. "The way you talk, it sounds like you know him already?"

Of course, Mo Ran couldn't tell him the truth, so he joked without a hint of seriousness: "Nope, I don't know him, but I only judge people by their faces. He's good-looking, so I like him a whole lot."

Xue Meng scorned, "Disgusting!"

Mo Ran laughed, waving his hand as he turned around, flipping an offensive hand gesture at Xue Meng behind his back. He then lazily walked back to his own little stone house, barring the door with a klunk, and shutting all of Xue Meng's cursing and swearing outside.

The morning of the next day, Mo Ran got up early.

The feathered cultivators delayed cultivation practice for three days so they could get accustomed to life at Peach Blossom Springs. After Mo Ran freshened himself up, he saw that Ye Wangxi left on his own. The other two hadn't woken up yet either, so he went for a stroll through the streets.

Amidst the thin layer of morning fog, quite a few cultivators glided by with light steps, rushing to their own individual cultivation grounds.

Mo Ran passed by a breakfast stall and saw a fresh pot of steam-fried buns. He thought of his little shidi, who was still sick, and walked over to say, "I'll take eight fried buns and one bowl of sweet congee to go, Mrs. Shopkeep."

The feathered stall owner didn't even lift her head up and replied: "Give me six feathers."

Mo Ran stared blankly. "Six what?"

"Six feathers."

".....So do I need to find a chicken right now and pluck a couple of feathers?"

That feathered shopkeeper raised her eyes to give him a look. "No feathers and you still want food? Go, get lost."

Mo Ran was both irked and humored, but just as he was about to ask again, a familiar voice suddenly came from behind him. A hand wrapped in bandages reached out, six glimmering, resplendent golden feathers pinched between his fingers.

"Mrs. Shopkeep, some porridge please. It's on me."

The feathered shopkeep took the feathers, not wanting to waste any more time on them, and turned to pack up the breakfast to go. Mo Ran turned his head, and saw that Ye Wangxi was standing by his side, standing tall and handsome, his presence elegant.

"Thank you very much." Mo Ran grabbed the still-steaming, piping hot buns and the sweet congee, and walked away with Ye Wangxi, "If I hadn't run into you today, I'm afraid we might've gone hungry."

"No worries," Ye Wangxi said. "Miss Eighteen doesn't have a good memory, and always forgets to give newcomers some feathers. I also ran into you by chance; it's not much skin off my back, so don't worry about it."

Mo Ran asked him, "Do you need these feathers to do all the business in Peach Blossom Springs?"

"That's right."

"Where do the feathers come from?"

Ye Wangxi replied, "They're plucked."

"P...Pluck...ed..." Mo Ran felt slightly dumbfounded. These feathers really were plucked straight off the body of a bird? Then wouldn't the birds around here all end up completely bald?

Seeing his shocked face, Ye Wangxi glanced at him with amusement: "What are you thinking about? In Peach Blossom Springs, there's a place called the Ancestral Abyss. Legend has it that that was where the Zhuque immortal ascended. The bottom of the abyss is filled with roaring flames, it's hot beyond measure and hard to endure. Not a single inch of grass can grow there, and no beasts can survive either."

Mo Ran listened to his description, and immediately thought of the blood-red sky that he'd seen in the distance when he passed through the outskirts of the city yesterday. "Is the abyss near the northern part of the city?"

"You are correct."

"What does that have to do with the feathers?"

Ye Wangxi replied, "It's like this: although no other creatures can live around the Ancestral Abyss, there is a flock of angry owls that lives inside. They make their nests with the fire, hide during the day, and come out at night. Their feathers can help people from the feathered cultivators' tribe refine their cultivation.

"So that's how it is," Mo Ran grinned. "No wonder they want to trade goods for feathers, then."

"Mn. But you should be mindful, because when they come out at night, their feathers will turn into normal ones, the same as those from regular owls. Even if you catch them then, they won't be useful at all. Only at daybreak every day, when the sun rises in the east, will the flock of owls return to the Ancestral Abyss in the hundreds and thousands. The moment right before they enter their abyss, their feathers will turn gold again, and only then is it useful to pluck them."

"Haha, wouldn't that be the same as practicing footwork and flying skills? If your skills are subpar, then you'd fall in and become barbecue. If you don't go and harvest feathers, then you'd probably starve to death." Mo Ran couldn't help but click his tongue. "That's pretty rough."

Ye Wangxi asked, "Could it be that you're not good at light footwork?"

Mo Ran chuckled. "Just so-so."

"That won't do," Ye Wangxi replied, "The owls' movements are swift and violent, no slower than a falcon or hawk. If you don't practice diligently, then you'll go hungry after a couple of days."

"So that's how it is....."

When he saw that Mo Ran was still spacing out, Ye Wangxi sighed and spoke again: "I've acquired quite a few feathers, and I'm not lacking for the time being. If the three of you need some, then just ask me for now."

Mo Ran waved his hand again, smiling. "How could we do that? Let's just count this as me borrowing these six feathers from you. I'm going to go back and eat some food first, and if I can harvest some feathers tomorrow, I'll pay you back. Thanks a lot."

Mo Ran bade farewell to Ye Wangxi, carrying the congee and food back to the courtyard.

Xue Meng's room was empty. He'd probably woken up and gotten bored, and went out for a stroll. Mo Ran then went to Chu Wanning's bamboo house.

Chu Wanning hadn't woken up yet. Mo Ran set the congee and steam-fried buns on the table, and went to his bedside. He lowered his head to take a look.

All of a sudden, a familiar feeling washed over him.

This little shidi's appearance while sleeping..... why did it seem like a certain someone?

But he couldn't think of exactly who his shidi's appearance resembled. He only had a fuzzy impression of someone else who was just like this, someone who always curled himself up into a ball while laying on his bed, his hands under his cheeks—but who was it, exactly?

While he was busy getting lost in his thoughts, Chu Wanning woke up.

"Wuuuh....." He rolled over. Chu Wanning saw the person beside his bed, and suddenly opened his eyes wide. "Mo Ran?"

"How many times have I told you, you should call me Shixiong." Mo Ran ruffled his hair a bit, and then took his temperature by feeling his forehead, "It seems like your fever's broken. Come on, get up and eat some food."

"Eat food....." The child on the bed repeated blankly, his messy hair just making his face look cuter.

"Look at how much shixiong cares about you, I got up so early to go buy breakfast. You should eat it while it's still hot."

Chu Wanning put on his spotlessly white inner robes and got off the bed, walking towards the dining table. On top of the dining table, there was a single fresh lotus leaf. The steam-fried buns inside had thin skins and crispy bottoms, with jade-green pieces of chopped green onion and black sesame scattered over top. On the other side, there was a small bowl of longan and osmanthus congee. It was soft and sticky, but thick and rich at the same time, still piping hot, with clouds of steam rising from it.

The usually strong and steadfast Yuheng elder was suddenly unsure of himself. "For me?"

"Ah?"

"Do you buy all of this.....for me?"

Mo Ran was stunned for a second. "That's right."

He watched Chu Wanning, who looked all hesitant and unsure. He thought about it and smiled, "Hurry and eat up, otherwise it'll go cold."

Although Chu Wanning had been in Sisheng peak for so many years, and everyone respected him, almost no one would eat food with him because his cold and stiff personality. They were even less likely to bring him a portion of breakfast from the canteen. Sometimes, he'd watch the disciples taking care of each other, and he was unwilling to admit it, but he couldn't help being slightly jealous of them in his heart. And so, faced with this bowl of porridge and a couple of buns, he couldn't bring himself to actually eat them. A long while passed in silence.

Mo Ran saw him sitting on the small stool, staring at the food in front of him and not moving his chopsticks, and thought the food might not be to his tastes. "What's wrong?" Mo Ran asked. "Is it too greasy for you?"

"....."

Chu Wanning looked back at him and shook his head. He picked up his spoon, scooping up a spoonful of congee. He blew on it, and took a careful sip.

If he was still the beautiful, cold, and distant Chu-zongshi from before, then he would seem elegant and refined eating congee in such a manner, as though he was practicing restraint.

But in the body of a child, he just looked slightly awkward and pitiful.

Mo Ran misinterpreted his hesitation, and said to him, "Do you not like longans? You can pick them out and leave them by the side then, it's no biggie."

"No." The little shidi's face wasn't too expressive, but when he looked towards Mo Ran again, his crow-black eyes were soft. "I like it."

"Oh..... Haha, that's good then, I thought that you didn't like it."

Chu Wanning's thick curtain of lashes swept downwards, and he repeated his words quietly, "I like it. No one's ever taken care of me like this before."

As he spoke, he lifted his eyes to glance at Mo Ran. He spoke again, earnestly.

"Thank you very much, shixiong."

Mo Ran didn't expect that he'd say something like that, and couldn't help feel stunned.

He wasn't a naturally kind person, and didn't particularly like kids. He only treated Xia Sini well because his skills were unusually good at a young age, and he seemed like a junior worth making friends with.

Mo Ran was only thinking about things practically, but seeing how Chu Wanning was treating this matter sincerely, he couldn't help but blush with shame. However, after hearing what his shidi had said, he thought it was a little strange. Mo Ran waved his hand to tell Chu Wanning that he didn't need to thank him, and asked, "Has nobody ever bought you breakfast before?"

Chu Wanning nodded expressionlessly.

"Do Xuanji Elder's disciples not know to look after one another or something?"

Chu Wanning replied, "I don't hang out with them much."

"What about before you came to the sect? When you lived at your old house, your mom and dad....." After saying the first half of his sentence, Mo Ran stopped.

Seeing how his little shidi was so quick-witted and pure as snow, what sort of parents would have the heart to leave such a kid on top of a mountain to cultivate, and never come back and come visit him ever again? It seemed like he had suffered the same experiences as Shi Mei and himself.

As expected, Chu Wanning spoke calmly: "My parents abandoned me, and I didn't have any other relatives, so there was nobody to look after me."

Mo Ran was silent for a long while before letting out a big sigh. He thought: Originally I just wanted to be friends with this kid, one, because his cultivation level was quite high, and two, because he was steady and mature, unlike the usual rowdy kid. Who would've thought that he came from the same background as me...

Looking at the little shidi in front of him, Mo Ran couldn't help thinking of his own childhood and remembering those years filled with bitterness and hardships. He felt a surge of emotion rush through his chest that filled him with sympathy and a sense of intimacy. Suddenly, he spoke: "There was nobody to

take care of you before, but there will be from now on. Since you've already called me your shixiong, I'll take care of you properly from here on out."

It seemed like Chu Wanning didn't expect him to say this, and was a bit surprised. After a while, his features melted slowly into a tiny smile, and he spoke: "You'll take care of me?"

"Mn. If you stick with me from now on, I'll teach you meditation and sword techniques."

Chu Wanning's grin widened. "You'll teach me meditation and sword techniques?"

Mo Ran misinterpreted his expression and scratched his head, saying, "Don't make fun of me, I know that your cultivation level is already pretty good, but you're still young, after all, and you have lots to learn. There's a lot of disciples under Xuanji elder, and he probably won't be able to teach you individually. What's wrong with learning a bit from me? At the very least, I'm still a person with a spiritual weapon."

Chu Wanning was silent for a moment, and finally spoke: "I wasn't making fun of you. I.....think you're great."

Chu Wanning would've never been able to say something like this before. However, ever since his body had gotten smaller, it seemed as though his personality had gotten gentler and softer too. It was as if he was hiding under a cloak of darkness and could finally take off his rock-hard mask.

As for Mo Ran, although he'd lived through two lifetimes, this was the first time someone had praised him like that and told him "you're great." Even though the one who praised him was just a little kid, he was still at a loss at what to do, overwhelmed by the pleasant surprise. Mo Ran could do nothing but sputter for a while. His skin, which had always been as thick as city walls, actually flushed red.

He repeated what was said to him, stuttering, "I, I-I-I'm great.....you really think I'm great?"

Suddenly, Mo Ran vaguely recalled that, when he was young, he had wanted to be a good person.

But that small, gentle wish of his from back then, much like all of his other little wishes—"When I grow up, I want to ask Li-zizi^[2] from the makeup store to marry me", "When I have money, I want to eat pancake fritters every day", "If I could have just two pieces of barbecued meat for every meal, I wouldn't trade it even for immortality"—all of it, in the end, became nothing more than memories blown away by the wind and scattered in the snow.

Ch.62 This Venerable One Arrives At Ancient Lin'an

Their training began without delay. Mo Ran liked feather-gathering the most—after all, it's not like he actually expected to learn much from these losers that he had already trounced thoroughly in the last life—having the funds to indulge with was where it's at.

Every day before the break of dawn, they would go to the Ancestral Abyss to loot golden feathers. Next up was meditation in the ZhuRong Cave to refine cultivation by training their inner spiritual energy against the burning Yang

energy of the cave. And four hours after that was demon suppression practice with the feathered tribe.

Another four hours of that, and then they would go to Asura Arena to engage in practice matches against one another.

And finally, in the evening, before the night fell, Miss Eighteen would lecture on 《The Demon Compendium》 and 《Art of Exorcism》 at the Stargazing Cliffs of the Peach Blossom Springs.

Of course Mo Ran's favorite time of day was the nightly lecture at the Stargazing Cliffs, because that was the only lesson attended by cultivators in all three specialized divisions.

He knew that Shi Mei wasn't great at footwork, and worried if he had enough to eat, so he made sure to give Shi Mei half of his harvested feathers every day. But outside of that, he hardly even had any chance to interact with Shi Mei. Instead, he spent every day with Chu Wanning, the two gradually becoming inseparable.

During this span of time, they could often be seen together, day in and day out, cloudy and sunny, with Chu Wanning sitting on the railing of a bridge playing a tune on a leaf, and Mo ran sitting next to him, cheek propped up in one hand.

Or, sometimes, Chu Wanning would be feeding fish by the river, and Mo Ran would stand to the side holding an umbrella, watching the koi fish leap, golden scales glimmering against waters of clear jade.

When it rained at the Peach Blossom Springs, Mo Ran would hold Chu Wanning's hand while they walked along a limestone footpath, its stones cracked from age, an oil paper umbrella held evenly above the two of them.

If the rainwater began to collect on the ground, Mo Ran would pick up his little shidi and carry him on his back, and the little guy would hold quietly onto his shoulders as the drops of rain pitter-pattered all around them.

And if the close contact got to be a bit too warm and sweat started to bead on his forehead, the wordless shidi on his back would reach out and wipe his sweat for him with a handkerchief. The handkerchief was a plain white, with a haitang flower sewn on a corner. Mo Ran kept feeling like it looked familiar, as if he had seen it somewhere before, but the careless thought fleetingly across and was lost, like the drizzle of rain falling into a deep pond.

One day, Chu Wanning was resting in the courtyard when Mo Ran undid his braid on a whim and tied his hair up into a high ponytail instead. He was halfway through brushing his hair when Ye Wangxi walked in holding his left shoulder, expression gloomy.

Mo Ran, ever observant, raised his eyebrows slightly: "Did Ye-xiong get injured?"

"En." Ye Wangxi paused, then furrowed his brows, "It's nothing, just got grazed in a fight. But that guy was truly such a depraved lecher, how despicable!"

"....."

Mo Ran sputtered in disbelief: "Did you get groped?"

Ye Wangxi glared daggers at him, and said, coldly: "What exactly are you thinking about."

"Hahaha, just kidding." Mo Ran laughed awkwardly, but couldn't resist the curiosity, "Who was it though?"

Ye Wangxi replied: "Who else could it be but that flirt from Kunlun Taxue Palace."

Mo Ran let out an “ah” at these words, thinking: Could it be that guy?

Recently, he often came across female disciples at the Peach Blossom Springs whispering amongst themselves, “da-shixiong” this, “da-shixiong” that. It was one thing for the younger ones, but just yesterday he saw a forty, maybe fifty-some year old female cultivator in hysterics by the flower bushes, muttering with distant eyes: “Not a single man in this world could even hope to hold a candle to da-shixiong..... if only he would look my way, speak to me, I’d willingly go to hell with no regrets.”

Mo Ran had lost it right there and burst out laughing at the lovelorn display. He had a sneaking suspicion as to whom this “da-shixiong” might be, but the Peach Blossom Springs was full of cultivators who barely even interacted, so he had never seen this person despite hearing his name mentioned time and again, and he knew enough shame to not go inserting himself into the gossip of female disciples, so he couldn’t be sure.

“I was having a drink at the LingHu Tavern in the western market,” Ye Wangxi said, “That bastard happened to be there too, with a girl in each arm. It was depraved, but that’s their choice and none of my business, so I couldn’t exactly say anything.”

Mo Ran agreed: “Makes sense.”

“But then, a female Guyue’ye disciple ran in, looking around with an anxious expression, clearly looking for someone.”

Mo Ran laughed: “Let me guess, she was looking for that ‘da-shixiong’?”

“You’ve heard of this da-shixiong too?”

“Haha, well, I mean, if even an upstanding individual like you has heard tell of his philandering ways, how could a gossipy person like myself not know?”

Ye Wangxi shot him a wordless glance, then continued: “That da-shixiong is truly a piece of work. Turns out, the Guyue’ye girl came looking because he had exchanged tokens of affection with her some days ago, saying he’ll be her cultivation partner and stay by her side forever.”

Mo Ran laughed again: “Yeah that’s bullshit. I bet da-shixiong has like seventeen copies of that ‘token of affection’, one for every girl he’s after. Probably spouts the same pledge of undying love word for word too.”

Chu Wanning had been listening quietly, but now he glanced at Mo Ran and said, disgruntled: “Of course you would know.”

But who would have thought that Ye Wangxi would take Mo Ran’s side: “Mo-xiong has the right of it, the truth is exactly so. That girl was a secret admirer of da-shixiong’s to start with, so she took him at his word and gave her virginity to him that very night.”

Mo Ran hurriedly covered Chu Wanning’s ears with an “aiyo.”

Chu Wanning, unfazed: “What are you doing?”

“Little ones can’t listen to this, it’s bad for your cultivation.”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Mo Ran made sure that Chu Wanning’s ears were firmly covered, then immediately asked, with sparkles in his eyes: “And then?”

Ye Wangxi was a respectable individual; he had no idea that Mo Ran, the rascal, was listening to his recount of righteous indignation like he would some trashy romance, so he replied with an air of integrity: “What do you think? Da-shixiong denied it, of course, he didn’t even want to give her the time of day and

have some words at least. That girl took out the sword tassel he gave her as token, but didn't expect the two on da-shixiong's arms to each pull out their own, saying that he gives one to every friend, that it wasn't something special for a cultivation partner."

"Tsk tsk, that's shameless all right."

"Right?" Ye Wangxi said, "I couldn't just sit and watch, so I went over to have a word with him."

His expression shifted slightly, and there was a pause before he continued: "The talk went nowhere, so we got in a fight instead."

Mo Ran gave a smile: "I see."

But he was actually thinking: That's probably not the whole story. If this "da-shixiong" was indeed the person that he thought he was, then based on his personality, he definitely wouldn't get in a fight with someone over something like this. Ye Wangxi had probably omitted something out of embarrassment.

But since Ye Wangxi didn't want to say it, Mo Ran didn't press the issue, changing the topic instead: "That da-shixiong must be pretty good in a fight then, I can't imagine just any random person being able to land a hit on Ye-xiong."

Which was evidently the wrong thing to say, as it only seemed to make Ye Wangxi even madder, anger flickering like a wildfire in those dark eyes.

"Pretty good? Yeah right." Ye Wangxi said with indignation, "He himself can't get any more mediocre, the women did all the fighting for him——what a good-for-nothing!"

"Ah? Hahahahaha." At these words, Mo Ran took a closer look at Ye Wangxi to find that, aside from the sword wound on his shoulder, there were a couple of bloody scratches on his cheek that were clearly from a woman's nails, and almost fell over laughing, "Da-shixiong sure does live up to his reputation, hahahaha."

Chu Wanning said nothing. He seemed to have been pondering something ever since Ye Wangxi said "the talk went nowhere, so we got in a fight instead."

He waited until Ye Wangxi left to go bandage his wounds in his room before saying: "Mo Ran."

Mo Ran bopped his head: "Call me shixiong."

"....." Chu Wanning continued, "This da-shixiong, is it Mei Hanxue?"

Mo Ran said with a grin: "That's what I think."

Chu Wanning fell silent again, deep in thought.

Then, as if suddenly coming to a realization, his eyes opened wide: "Could it be that Ye Wangxi got——"

"Shh! Quiet!" Mo Ran raised a finger to his lips in a hushing gesture, then crouched down to Chu Wanning's height, smiling, "Aren't you a little too young to be thinking about that stuff?"

".....I've long heard that this Mei Hanxue person is very.....unreliable, that he's done all sorts of preposterous things, but to think that he'd dare to have a go at even a disciple of Rufeng Sect....."

Mo Ran laughed: "Hahaha, unreliable is one way to put it. But anyway, let's stay out of other people's business. Here, let shixiong finish putting your hair up. I saw a pretty hair clasp while I was out at west street earlier, and it wasn't too pricey either, so I grabbed it. Let's have you try it on."

Just like how Mo Ran didn't like Chu Wanning's tastes, Chu Wanning was also less than impressed with Mo Ran's tastes.

Chu Wanning stared silently at that overly vibrant and honestly gaudy hair clasp decorated with golden orchids and butterflies: ".....Are you sure that's for me?"

"Yup! Little kids should wear lively colors like gold and red."

Chu Wanning: "....."

He really didn't want it, but thinking about it again, this seems to be the first time that Mo Ran's ever gifted him something, so he closed his mouth and said nothing, face full of gloom as Mo Ran fastened the clasp to his ponytail. The golden orchids and butterflies glimmered garishly against his long, inky hair.

Chu Wanning lowered his lashes.

He suddenly felt that this wasn't bad.

This kind of color, this kind of Mo Ran, this kind of himself. If he was in his normal form, none of this would have happened.

It was as if the butterflies had come from a dream.

The clouds overhead shifted and colored as sun and moon chased one another across the sky.

Half a year of training at the Peach Blossom Springs flew by in the blink of an eye.

Miss Eighteen had said that they would be tested at the half year mark to gauge their progress.

"This will be your first test since coming here." Eighteen announced gracefully to the assembly, "The content of the test will differ depending on your division, with three different disaster scenarios. Those of you in the defense division will enter the 'Domain of Blood River', those in the healing division will enter the 'Domain of Great Sorrows', and those in the attack division will enter the 'Domain of Fiends.'"

"Each of the three scenarios is an illusory realm that has been reconstructed using memories of the ghost realm invasion from hundreds of years ago. You will not be any danger while inside, and you will be returned here once you have resolved the crisis therein."

"Up to two people can enter the illusory realm at a time. In other words, you can challenge it alone, or invite one other person to go together. As for the order of testing, that will be announced by the envoys anon."

The assembly was dismissed, and the tests began. Mo Ran didn't know how things were going over at the defense and healing divisions, but for the attack division at least, half a dozen people have already gone through it, and all did pretty well, so it seemed the test probably wasn't too hard.

Ten days later, it was Mo Ran's turn.

Eighteen was the one in charge of the attack division. She smiled and asked: "Will Mo-xianjun^[3] be going with a partner?"

Mo Ran thought about it: "If I choose someone to go along with me, would they then be exempt from having to go through the test again?"

"Of course."

"Then I'll bring my shidi." Mo Ran pointed at Chu Wanning, "He's still young, I'll worry if he goes at it alone."

The moon hung bright overhead as they followed Eighteen to a pitch-black cave, its entrance covered with a thin layer of reddish-gold mist.

Eighteen said: "Please listen well—the scene within the Domain of Fiends is that of the calamity from two hundred years ago, the first breakage of the ghost

realm barrier. At that time, because the barrier wasn't able to be repaired in time, masses of vengeful ghosts and malicious spirits escaped into the human realm and slaughtered countless living beings. This illusory realm is an emulation based on the memories of a survivor from Lin'an back then. Stepping into this cave will bring you to the battle-torn Lin'an City of two hundred years ago. Slay the Ghost King leading the army, and the illusion will dissipate on its own."

Mo Ran glanced at Chu Wanning, then turned to smile at Eighteen: "Big sister, I'm sturdy so it's whatever, but my shidi is only six, and swords don't have eyes, what if he gets injured....."

"There is no need to worry, the weapons inside the illusion will not actually hurt you." Eighteen explained, "Any injuries you sustain will only be marked with a spiritual signifier. However, if you get marked at a vital area representing a fatal injury, you will have failed the challenge."

Relieved, Mo Ran clasped his hands together and grinned: "I see, thank you for the kind considerations."

And so, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning headed into the test without worry. The cave was pitch-black; stepping inside felt like missing a step, like their bodies were abruptly suspended in mid air, followed immediately by blurry images flashing before their eyes, countless contorted faces flowing together into a river passing below them.

When their feet landed back on solid ground, they found themselves transported to ancient Lin'an, on a road at the outskirts. It was noon, the sun blazed from above, and a putrid smell filled the air.

The sight of the ancient Lin'an City of two hundred years ago, plagued nightly by hordes of ghosts, accompanied by the heavy stench of rotting flesh, unfolded slowly before Mo Ran and Chu Wanning's eyes like a weathered scroll scorched by the flames of war

Mini Theater 【Feathered Tribe Instanced Dungeon Options】

What would be the ending to an instanced dungeon with Mo Ran and Chu Wanning?

No healing, death.

What would be the ending to an instanced dungeon with Mo Ran and Shi Mei?

No opportunity, the author refused.

What would be the ending to an instanced dungeon with Mo Ran and Xue Meng?

Bicker in front of the boss about who can self destruct faster.

What would be the ending to an instanced dungeon with Xue Meng and Shi Mei?

Normal composition, there is a possibility of winning.

What would be the ending to an instanced dungeon with Xue Meng and Shizun?

Death, one DPS standing at the sidelines cheering for another DPS.

What would be the ending to an instanced dungeon with Shizun and Shi Mei?

Boss dies under the hands of a rampant Mo Ran, this instance does not exist.

Ch.63 This Venerable One Sees.....Whom?!

>>gory

Lin'an City back then was deep in the midst of war, congealing blood covered the ground everywhere the eye could see, and all around were crumbled walls and ruined houses. Suffocated by the heavy miasma of malicious ghosts, the trees and flora had all withered away.

Mo Ran hadn't even collected himself yet when he heard some strange sounds and looked up. Not far away, fresh entrails were hanging off the branch of an old pagoda tree, and a dozen crows had set upon it in a feast, blood and flesh dripping nonstop.

And underneath the tree was the corpse of a middle-aged man, blood and organs spilling out from his stomach where it had been torn open by claws. No one would ever know if he had died with his eyes open or closed, because his eyeballs had already been pecked away.

Mo Ran was no stranger to such scenes.

In his past life, he had once crossed the breadth of the human world to put all seventy two cities of the Rufeng Sect to the sword. Back then, blood flowed like rivers and corpses covered the fields, making for a sight much like this one.

But for some reason he couldn't understand, even though he had reveled in the blood spilt in that life, with every fiber of his being roaring willfully, to suddenly see a similar scene of devastation before him now, he felt instead a biting sympathy..... had he been faking tameness for so long that his true nature had actually gotten unwittingly changed?

He was just pondering the point when he heard the sound of hooves from up ahead, accompanied by a cloud of dust.

Anyone galloping around in such war-torn times was probably bad news.

Mo Ran immediately pulled Chu Wanning behind himself, but there was nowhere to hide on this barren old road. A group of riders quickly emerged from the dust cloud, some dozen in all, but when they got closer to see, it was apparent that their horses were the opposite of sturdy—a few were so starved that their ribs were sticking out.

They were dressed in the same style of white attire with patterns in bright red, wore helmets embellished with feathers in like colors, and each donned a circlet of entwined dragons. The clothes were dirty yet neatly worn, and the people were thin but spirited. Even more unusual was the fact that each of them had a bow and a full quiver of arrows on their backs.

In times of war, the two most valuable things were food and weapons.

These were clearly not ordinary people.

Mo Ran was still trying to decide if the new arrivals were good or evil, friend or enemy, when one among them—a youth of only fourteen or fifteen—cried out in horror: "Dad! DAD!!"

The youth stumbled off his horse and fell in the muddied ground below, but immediately crawled up and staggered toward the tree to throw himself on the mangled body of the middle-aged man, crying miserably: "Dad! Dad!"

The others wore expressions of pity, but they had all clearly seen too much death already, so much that they had become numb to it. And so the youth held the corpse and cried in agony, but no one else so much as got off their horse to offer any comfort.

One of them noticed Mo Ran and Chu Wanning standing not far away, and was startled for a moment before asking in a thick Lin'an accent: "You guys aren't from around here, are you?"

Mo Ran answered: "Yeah.....we're from the Shu area."

"So far?" The asker was shocked, "The way the world is these days, ghosts are everywhere as soon as night falls, how did the two of you survive this far?"

".....I can fight a little." Mo Ran knew it was best to reveal as little as possible, and since these people don't seem to be malicious, he pulled Chu Wanning out to change the subject, "This is my little brother, we were passing by and stopped to rest for a while."

Some of the riders, upon seeing Chu Wanning, seemed a bit taken aback; a couple of them turned to whisper amongst themselves.

Mo Ran, alarmed: "Something wrong?"

"It's nothing." The young man at the head of the group said, "But onto serious matters—you should go into the city if you want to rest. There may not be any monsters around right now, but ghosts will be crawling the streets once night falls. XiaoMan's adoptive father came out looking for food during the day yesterday, but there was a thunderstorm and he couldn't make it back before nightfall, and then....." He sighed heavily and didn't finish the sentence.

XiaoMan was the name of that wailing youth, and the one under the tree was his adoptive father. Such occurrences were commonplace in these chaotic times; someone in a family would go out to look for food, perfectly fine as they leave in the morning, but never to return by night.

Even knowing that these were already events of two hundred years past, Mo Ran, watching that youth cry miserably as if he were about to weep blood, still felt a tightness in his chest.

Followed immediately by a sudden unease.

Had he grown so soft? He hardly even blinked when killing people in the last life.

He quickly grabbed Chu Wanning and bid the group farewell.

The leader of the group said: "When you get to Lin'an City, find somewhere to stay for a while. We're planning to relocate everyone to PuTuo soon, where the abundance of spiritual energy has warded off the ghost invasion, at least for the time being. You should come with us, rather than traveling with just the two of you."

"Relocate?"

"That's right." The leader's eyes sparked to life, and even his face seemed to light up at this, "It's all thanks to Chu-gongzi's brilliant plan, everyone in the city, from the elderly to the tots, will get to keep their lives now! But enough chatter, we still have to patrol around the city before it gets dark, see if we can find any more survivors to bring back—ai, XiaoMan, come on, we should go."

But XiaoMan only continued to cry, clutching his father's corpse without even turning around.

Mo Ran sighed and tugged at Chu Wanning, saying in a quiet voice: "Let's go to the city first."

Chu Wanning nodded, but then suddenly asked: "Do you think they managed it in the end?"

Mo Ran, holding his small hand that felt a bit cold: "Do you want the truth, or a lie?"

"The truth, of course."

"The lie would be better for little kids."

So Chu Wanning answered his own question: "They didn't."

"You're right." Mo Ran said, "See, you already knew the answer, but you still had to ask, as if that would change the outcome."

Chu Wanning ignored him and continued asking: "Do you know why they didn't make it out?"

"It's not like I'm some two hundred year old demon, how would I know?"

Chu Wanning fell silent for a while before saying gloomily: "Two hundred years ago, practically no one in Lin'an City survived."

Mo Ran: "....."

Chu Wanning: "Only a few escaped."

"Wait, shidi, you're so young, how do you know so much?"

Chu Wanning shot him a glare: "Yuheng Elder went over this in history lessons more than once. You decide to not pay attention in class, then turn around and ask me how I know things, how despicable."

Mo Ran was speechless, thinking: *Sure I spaced out in class, but even my own Shizun didn't scold me, what're you scolding me for?* But then again, no point arguing with a little kid, so he'll let it slide.

The two of them headed toward the city, chatting along the way, and arrived at the city gates before long. The ancient city stood tall on the bank of the QianTang River, and was already heavily fortified against ghosts and demons, with defensive structures lining the walls and the perimeter.

Countless corpses with curse marks piled outside the city. Such remains, if not taken care of, will reanimate at night.

There were cultivators outside spreading incense ash on the corpses while the sun was still high in the sky and the Yang energy was strong. And for the ones afflicted with especially strong curses, they performed exorcism using talismans drawn with cinnabar dipped in wine.

A pair of guards stood before spiked defensive frames by the city gates, dressed just like the riders they met earlier, with white attire trimmed in red, twin dragon circlets, bows on their arms and a full quiver of arrows on their backs.

"Halt, identify yourselves."

Mo Ran repeated his story from earlier. The guards weren't there to refuse anyone entry, but only to register new arrivals, and so they were let through after putting their names down.

Before leaving, Mo Ran remembered that the riders earlier had mentioned a "Chu-gongzi"; since the relocation was this Chu-gongzi's idea, he must be crucial to breaking the illusion.

"Sorry to bother, sir, but might I ask about someone?" Mo Ran said.

The guard looked at him: "Aren't you from Shu? You know someone here?"

Mo Ran smiled: "No, but we met some sentry sirs earlier who mentioned a gongzi by the name of Chu who's going to take everyone in the city to PuTuo in

two days, so I was wondering who this Chu-gongzi was. I know some magic, and wanted to see if I could help in some way.”

The guard looked him up and down, and probably decided that he must have some skill to be able to bring a little kid all the way here without any mishap, so he said: “Chu-gongzi is the eldest son of the lord governor. The lord governor was killed a month ago when the Ghost King descended, and the gongzi has led us since.”

“The governor’s son?” Mo Ran and Chu Wanning exchanged a glance, then Mo Ran turned to ask, “That’s strange, how does the governor’s son know magic?”

“What’s so strange about that!” The guard glared at Mo Ran, “Since when was there a rule that you have to be in a big sect to cultivate, that the common people can’t do it?”

“.....”

Sure, there were independent cultivators, but they never amounted to anything.

Mo Ran thought to himself, could it be that this amateur Chu-gongzi and his half-baked idea was what got everyone at Lin’an killed?

But as they followed the guard’s directions toward the governor’s residence, Mo Ran immediately realized how wrong he was. This esteemed personage who just so happened to share a name with his Shizun was clearly no amateur.

Because he saw a Shangqing barrier.

Shangqing barrier was a powerful variety of barrier formed with purified energy, capable of warding off all evils. As long as this barrier stood, even thousand-year malicious spirits can’t hope to enter, much less the average ghost.

But this barrier required the caster to remain within its range in order to ground the spell, and protected a relatively small area. Even a mighty zongshi like Chu Wanning could only cover about half of Sisheng Peak with a Shangqing barrier.

But right here and now, this Chu-gongzi of two hundred years ago had erected a Shangqing barrier covering a radius of ten li [5 km] around the governor’s residence. Although a far cry from Chu Wanning’s capabilities, it was certainly no ordinary achievement.

The two of them headed toward the gates of the residence. Mo Ran was going to try his luck and have someone notify the governor gongzi that a cultivator was offering help, see if he would be willing to show them the courtesy of a personal meeting.

But when they turned the corner, they were met with the unexpected sight of three long lines of people queued up in front of the gates. Six female attendants, dressed like the guards, were bringing out large wooden barrels, and hundreds of emaciated people—the elderly, the infirm, women and children—were waiting their turn to receive porridge.

Those who had gotten their porridge went to a haitang tree by the residence. A man dressed in white, with his long inky hair loosely tied back, stood under the tree, passing out protection talismans and patiently repeating instructions.

His back was facing Mo Ran, so he couldn’t see what he looked like.

But he heard the people who had received the talismans muttering “Many thanks for Chu-gongzi’s kindness, many thanks for Chu-gongzi’s kindness.....” as they dispersed.

So this was the governor gongzi?
Mo Ran, curious, dragged his little shidi around to get a look at his face.
Just one look, and Mo Ran's eyes were boggling out of their sockets, as if struck by lightning——

I-isn't this Chu Wanning???

Not just Mo Ran, even Chu Wanning himself was dumbfounded. Straining to see from their place at the end of the line, this governor Chu-gongzi had a lean face, with sword brows and phoenix eyes, but a gentle curve to the line of his nose, and he even wore all white, just like himself!

Chu Wanning: “.....”

Mo Ran: “.....”

After a long while of being frozen stiff, Mo Ran said shakily: “Shidi ah.”

“Mn.”

“Don't you feel like..... this Chu-gongzi looks just like a certain somebody?”

Chu Wanning, drily: “Just like Yuheng Elder.”

Mo Ran smacked his leg: “Right?! What's with that? Who is this? What's his relationship to Shizun?”

“.....Why are you asking me, how would I know.”

“I thought you paid attention in class?” Mo Ran was frantic.

“This is obviously not the content of any class.” Chu Wanning was irked.

Then they fell silent again, scooting forward slowly with the line, both of them staring unblinkingly at the gongzi.

Upon closer inspection, Chu-gongzi didn't look exactly like Chu Wanning. This gongzi's features were more mild and scholarly, his eyes weren't quite as long and narrow, his pupils were softer, and his gaze was much gentler than Chu Wanning's.

Mo Ran stared and stared, then suddenly let out an “eh?” and turned to look down at his little shidi.

“Let me look at you.”

“What do you want.....” Chu Wanning, ruffled, turned his face away.

But Mo Ran only grew more persistent at that, reaching out to grab his face and forcefully turn him back around. He stared for a while before finally coming to a realization and muttering: “Aiyah.”

Chu Wanning forced himself to remain calm: “Wh-what is it?”

Mo Ran narrowed his eyes: “No wonder those people outside the city were muttering amongst themselves when they saw you. I just noticed, but you look kinda like Shizun too.”

“.....”

Chu Wanning hurriedly wrenched himself out of Mo Ran's grip, the tips of his ears turning red: “Nonsense.”

"But how come those guards noticed immediately, but it didn't even occur to me for so long?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

In the midst of puzzlement, the voice of a young child called out: "Papa."

Ch.64 This Venerable One Tells Shidi a Story

Mo Ran looked to the direction that the voice came from only to see its source waddling unsteadily in a little jog from the stone steps of the residence.

It was a small child, three or four years old, a bamboo pinwheel in hand as he bounced toward Chu-gongzi. He was dressed simply, with a jade pendant hanging around his neck, along with a lock of entrusted name^[4] for good fortune and a protection amulet of red silk, and looked every bit like the little shidi, just smaller.

"....." Now Mo Ran truly knew the reason those riders were gossiping.

He couldn't help muttering: "Shidi ah, you and Shizun are both from Lin'an, and Shizun even has the Chu name. Do you think this Chu family from two hundred years ago might have been your ancestors, and that you two might be distant relatives.....? Seems pretty likely to me."

Chu Wanning said nothing, staring at the father and son.

He never knew his own origins, and didn't remember much of his childhood either.

Could this Chu-gongzi really be his ancestor.....

He was still pondering when Mo Ran reached the front of the line.

Chu-gongzi was just about to hand Mo Ran a talisman when he looked up to see an unfamiliar face. He paused minutely before smiling gently: "Is it your first time here?"

His voice was mellow and refined, a world apart from Chu Wanning's ice-cold severity.

"Uh..... uh y-yeah."

To be suddenly spoken to in such an open and friendly manner by someone who looked just like Shizun got Mo Ran feeling some kind of way, and he had to scramble for his bearings.

The governor gongzi smiled: "My name is Chu Xun, may I ask your name?"

"M-my name is Mo, M-Mo Ran."

"Where does Mo-gongzi hail from?"

"R-really far, fr-from uh, Shu." Chu Xun-gongzi was gentle and amiable, but Mo Ran just couldn't shake the feeling that he could see right through him.

Chu Xun agreed with a smile: "That is indeed quite far." He paused, gaze shifting downwards to Chu Wanning, surprise showing on his refined features.

"And this is....."

"My name is Xia Sini." Chu Wanning supplied.

Mo Ran pulled him closer and pat him on the head, forcing a smile: "This is my little brother."

Doesn't look like me, but looks just like you.

Maybe because there was an imminent battle and more pressing matters, and Chu Xun didn't have time to dwell on it, or maybe because he was merely part of an illusion and couldn't react much to something that didn't belong in the illusion to start with. Whatever the case may be, he stared at Chu Wanning for a while with scrunched brows, then simply handed them each a talisman.

"You are our guests from afar, especially in these difficult times, so please accept these talismans. And if you have no other plans, then please stay for a couple of days."

Mo Ran said: "I heard about it already, that gongzi intends to bring the people in the city to PuTuo? And what're the talismans for?"

"These are spirit-quenching talismans." Chu Xun explained, "They can conceal the aura of the living when worn on the body."

Mo Ran understood at once: "Ah, I get it. If the aura of the living is sealed, then the ghosts won't be able to tell the living from the dead, that way even if we walk right past any ghosts, they'll just be too confused to do anything."

Chu Xun smiled: "Precisely."

Seeing that he was quite busy, Mo Ran didn't want to take up more of his time with questions, so he thanked Chu Xun-gongzi and pulled his little shidi along to the side.

The two of them found a spot by the wall to sit down. Mo Ran turned toward Chu Wanning to see his little shidi spacing out at that talisman, and asked: "What are you thinking about?"

"I was thinking that this is a solid plan." Chu Wanning said quietly, still deep in thought, "So then, just what happened, that they couldn't make it out in the end."

"Is it not in the books?"

Chu Wanning said: "This two hundred year old disaster is covered in the most detail in 《The Lin'an Records》 , and even that book only has a few lines of text about it."

Mo Ran asked: "And what does it say?"

"Lin'an was besieged, the situation therein unknown. By the time the resistance army broke through, corpses strewed the roads, and the vast majority of houses were empty. Of the approximately one hundred people of the governor's residence and the seven hundred and forty common people, none survived."

"....." Mo Ran said, "Nothing about how they died?"

"Nothing. Lin'an City was completely surrounded, and hardly anyone survived. The feathered tribe saved a few lucky survivors later on, but they rarely involved themselves in mortal matters, so they saw things differently from how we would. As far as they were concerned, the truth of what happened wasn't all that important, and even if they knew, they still wouldn't talk about it unless there was some particular need to."

Chu Wanning paused before continuing: "But, since they're setting off in two days anyway, we'll find out what happened soon enough. In the meantime, we might as well walk around and see if we can find some clues."

The two of them tucked their spirit-quenching talismans away for safekeeping, and were just getting up to leave when there was a sudden burst of footsteps, followed by a tug on Chu Wanning's sleeve.

"Little gege."

Chu Wanning turned around. It was the little gongzi who looked just like him; he said in a small, childish voice: "Little gege, Papa said you two don't have anywhere to stay, so if you don't mind, you can stay with us tonight."

"Um....."

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran looked at each other.

Mo Ran asked: "Is that really okay? Your Papa is already so busy."

"It's okay." The little guy grinned guilelessly, "There are lots of people with nowhere to go staying with us already, we're all living together. Papa keeps the ghosts away at night, so we don't have to be scared."

He spoke with little pauses, not yet used to linking so many words together, but the open sincerity was heartwarming.

Mo Ran said: "Okay, we'll be imposing on you tonight then. Thank you, little didi."

"Hehe, no worries, no worries."

Watching him bounce away, Mo Ran tugged on Chu Wanning's hand: "Hey, really, I gotta say something."

"I know what you want to say, so shut it."

"Hahaha, you read my mind again?" Mo Ran ruffled his hair, grinning, "Once we get back to the Peak, I really gotta go ask Shizun about this. The two of you, one looks like the dad, one looks like the son, there's no way you guys aren't related to Governor Chu."

Chu Wanning: ".....And so what, even if we do turn out to be related?"

"Eh?"

Chu Wanning looked mildly toward the father and son beneath the tree, then said without any expression: "It's all in the past anyway. They're all dead already."

Then he turned and walked away.

Mo Ran stood rooted in place for a while before running after him, muttering: "Oi, aren't you a little too young to be so despondent? Even if they're dead, they're still your ancestors. If I was you, I'd definitely put up a shrine for them, with a statue, nine feet tall, all gold, decked out in jewelry, and burn incense for them every year. I'm counting on my ancestors for protection, you know..... hey, hey hey, what're you walking so fast for!"

While walking around the city, they noticed that every family was gathering straw and making fake straw men..

Upon asking about it, they were told that it was something Chu-Xun gongzi had asked for: everyone in the city, the young and the elderly alike, had to have a matching straw man in which to put a talisman with a drop of the person's blood, to substitute as a "fake puppet."

It was the same idea as tossing meat-stuffed mantous into the river as offerings to a river deity that demanded human heads.

Some ghosts and deities were simply and fundamentally not that smart; any little trick could fool them, like that ghost mistress from before, with nothing but mud rattling around between the ears.

It seemed that Chu Xun had arranged for at least two layers of precautions for the citizens. The first was the spirit-quenching talismans, so that they won't be discovered by the ghosts while running away.

And the second was the straw puppets, which act as decoys to buy some time for their escape, so that the ghosts won't immediately notice everyone in the city suddenly gone and fly into a rage.

But this only made the haze in their hearts even heavier.

Just how did such a carefully crafted plan end up falling through?

They returned to the governor's residence filled with misgivings. It was already dark by then, and many families had brought bedding to stay the night inside the Shangqing barrier rather than returning to their homes.

The governor kept his gates open at night, with only some guards patrolling the premises.

By the time the two of them arrived, all the rooms of the residence were already filled, with at least three or four families huddled in each. There were people crowded everywhere, with hardly any room left to even stand.

In the end, they could only find a corridor to rest in. There was no bedding, of course, so Mo Ran padded the ground with some straw he had asked the guards for, picked Chu Wanning up, and put him on the makeshift pallet.

"You'll have to make do with this tonight."

Chu Wanning said: "Looks comfortable enough."

"Really?" Mo Ran laughed, "I thought so too."

He flopped down next to Chu Wanning and stretched, then folded his arms behind his head and stared up at the wooden beams of the ceiling above.

"Shidi, take a look, those bird people aren't half bad at weaving illusions huh. Even with the memories of a survivor as foundation, it's still really something for it to be so detailed that you can even see the texture of the wood on the ceiling."

Chu Wanning said: "The feathered tribe are half-immortal, after all. Even if they're not all-powerful, they're still capable of some things that are beyond the abilities of mortals."

"I guess so." Mo Ran blinked, then rolled to face Chu Wanning, propping his head up, "I can't sleep."

"....." Chu Wanning glanced at him, "What do you want, a bedtime story?"

He was being sarcastic, but Mo Ran's face was thick as the city walls, laughing: "Yes please! I want the one about DongYong and the seven fairies."

Chu Wanning hadn't expected him to take it seriously, and was taken aback for a moment before turning away in a huff: "You wish. How old are you already, aren't you embarrassed."

Mo Ran grinned: "It's only human to want the things we can't have, nothing to do with age. I never had anyone to tell me bedtime stories when I was small, and I was always thinking about how nice it would be to have someone like that. But that person never showed up, and then I grew up and stopped thinking about it. But, deep inside, I still want it."

Chu Wanning: "....."

"You didn't have anyone to tell you bedtime stories either, did you?"

"Mm."

"Haha, so you don't actually know how the story of DongYong and the seven fairies goes, right?"

Chu Wanning: ".....What's the point to those silly stories, anyway."

"Just admit you don't know it, don't just write it off as a silly story. Else you're gonna grow up into a boring person like my Shizun, and everyone will avoid

you.”

Chu Wanning, angrily: “Who cares if everyone avoids me. I’m going to sleep.”

And with that, he lay down and closed his eyes.

Mo Ran rolled around with laughter until he rolled over next to Chu Wanning. Staring at his little shidi with his eyes closed, eyelashes long and dark, looking quite adorable, he couldn’t help reaching out to pinch his cheek.

“Are you really asleep?”

“I’m really asleep.”

“Haha.” Mo Ran laughed, “Then you keep sleeping, and I’ll tell you a bedtime story.”

“You know bedtime stories?”

“Yup, just like how you can sleeptalk.”

Chu Wanning stopped talking.

Mo Ran lay next to him on the straw bed, their heads mere inches away. He cackled for a bit, but seeing that his shidi was pointedly ignoring him, he stopped being quite so boisterous after a while to look up at the ceiling instead, eyes still curved with mirth. The smell of the straw wafted over now and again, accompanied by the quiet sounds of night.

“The story I’m about to tell you, I made it up myself. I envied those who had bedtime stories when I was young, but there was nothing for it, so every day I would tell myself stories while lying in bed. I’ll tell you my favorite one, it’s called ‘Ox Eats Grass’.”

Mini Theater 【Bedtime Story】

Weiyu starts bedtime stories like this: A long long time ago, there was a child...

Chu Wanning starts stories like this: The path that takes you to destination could be not the common path. What story? I don’t know how to. Recite sutra.

Xue Meng: No, no... pfft! Ok! Fine! I’ll listen.

Xue Meng starts bedtime stories like this: Let me tell you, I am an excellent student. I’ve received a countless number of first places since my childhood. Today I’ll tell you how I won the 14th annual youth blade technique championship haha~

Shi Mei starts stories like this: ... En... I’m not very good at telling stories, if it’s bad, please don’t mind it.

Ye Wangxi starts stories like this: You want to hear a story? Sure, let me go find a book, you can lie down first, tuck yourself into the blanket, don’t catch a cold.

Mei Hanxue starts stories like this: Story? Okay, Eldest Shi-Xiong can tell you a kissy kissy story between two male tigers, or one male and one female. Which version do you want?

Ch.65 This Venerable One's Story is Super Bad

Having spoken to this point, Mo Ran smiled again before he continued, "A long long time ago, there was a small child."

Chu Wanning's eyes were closed, "Wasn't it an ox grazing? How come it's a kid?"

"Let me finish." Mo Ran smiled hummily, "Once upon a time there was a small child, very poor. He didn't have a dad or a mom, and was a child labourer in the household of a landlord. He had to wash dishes, wash clothes, wipe the floors, and had to take the ox grazing too. The landlord's household gave him three pancakes to eat everyday, and the child was very happy that he could fill his stomach."

"One day, he took the ox out to graze as always. On the road, they bumped into a mad dog and it bit the leg of the ox. Because of this, the landlord unsurprisingly gave him a round of beatings. After the beatings, the landlord made him go kill that mad dog to vent, otherwise he wouldn't let the child have his pancakes."

"The child was very scared, and could only follow orders and brought that mad dog back after he beat it to death. However, when he came home, the landlord discovered that turns out, the dog that bit the leg of their cattle was actually the beloved canine of the county master."

Chu Wanning opened his eyes, "Then what can they do?"

"What else can they do? That dog was the County Master's most favourite's favourite, so the dog was used to having its way, using the might and power behind its back. Who knew it would get beaten to death so out of the blue just like that, and if the County Master should find out, he wouldn't let it go so easily. So, the more the landlord thought about it, the angrier he became, so in the end, he still never gave the small child his pancakes. He even threatened, if the County Master came looking for trouble, he would give the child out."

"...What is this mess, so unreasonable." Chu Wanning said, "I'm not listening to this anymore."

"There are a lot of things that aren't reasonable in the first place." Mo Ran laughed, "It's a matter of who has the most money, whose fist is tougher, and whose position is higher. The next day, the County Master indeed came knocking. The child was given away. But, since he really was too young, the County Master didn't have the face to lock him up, so he was flogged heavily for ten times before he was let go."

"And that child ran away after he was let go, right?" Chu Wanning asked.

"Haha, he didn't run away." Mo Ran replied, "The kid still went back to the landlord's household, recovered from his injuries, and went back to grazing the ox for them. Still getting three pancakes a day to eat."

"Isn't he angry?"

"As long as his stomach is filled he won't be angry." Mo Ran said, "A round of beatings is a round of beatings, after it's over, it's over. And things were peaceful for over a decade. Later, the oxherd boy grew up. He followed after those who were the same age as well as the landlord's son. One day, several esteemed guests came to the landlord's house, and the landlord's son saw one of the

guests had brought a particularly beautiful agate snuff bottle. He loved it so he stole it."

"That snuff bottle was an heirloom, extremely precious. The guest was quite panicked and looked all over the house for his possession. The landlord's son saw he couldn't hide anymore, so he stuffed the snuff bottle into that oxherd boy's hands and told him: if he dared tell the truth, then he will never receive any meals again, and will die from starvation."

"..." Having listened to this point, Chu Wanning was utterly speechless. He thought inwardly, while Mo Ran had wandered the streets since he was young, having been orphaned, but at the very least he had grown up at an entertainment house, his mother a managing head, so even though it wasn't the happiest of days, it wasn't miserable either, so why were all the stories he made up so gloomy and sad?

Mo Ran continued on, quite enjoying himself, "The snuff bottle was soon found. For the sake of meals, that oxherd boy could only force himself to take the blame, and naturally, what followed was another round of vicious beatings. This time, they beat him so hard he couldn't get out of bed for three days. The landlord's son got away with this this time, so he secretly snuck a steamed bun stuffed with marinated pork to the oxherd boy. That kid wolfed down the food, and stopped resenting this boy who harmed him. Since he's never tasted such delicacies before, as he held the bun, he kept saying to the landlord's son: thank you, thank you."

"I'm not listening anymore." This time, Chu Wanning really was aggravated, "How can he stop his resentment? A steamed bun and all is forgiven? And thanking him too! What's there to thank?!"

"No, you're not listening carefully." Mo Ran innocently blinked his eyes.

"How am I not listening carefully?"

Mo Ran straightened his face, "That was a steamed bun stuffed with marinated pork, I tell you."

Chu Wanning: "..."

"Haha, look at your face, you don't understand, do you? Usually, that child could only get his hands on a scrap or two of fatty meat during New Year's Eve. He had originally thought he was going to die never knowing what marinated pork was gonna taste like, so of course he'd thank the other party."

Seeing his little shidi was stumped speechless by his words, Mo Ran smiled exceedingly brilliantly, and continued, "Either way, this incident passed just like that. He still collected his three pancakes, and passed day by day. One day..."

Now Chu Wanning had had an idea of the pattern of Mo Ran's tales. The moment "One day" appeared, there was never anything good.

Sure enough, Mo Ran said, "One day, the landlord's son committed another crime."

"This time, he behaved indecently towards a neighbouring girl at the mill, and coincidentally, the unlucky oxherd boy bumped into the scene."

"...And that child is going to take the blame again?" Chu Wanning asked.

"Aiyah." Mo Ran laughed, "That's right. Congrats, congrats, you know how to tell stories now too."

"...I'm going to sleep."

"Don't, I'm almost done the story." Mo Ran said, "This is my first time tell someone a story, so grant me some face, will you?"

Chu Wanning: "..."

"This time, the oxherd boy must take the blame. Because, that girl couldn't take the shame and committed suided by way of bashing her head into the wall. But the oxherd boy wasn't dumb. A life for a life, there was no way he was going to give up his life for the landlord's son's sake." Mo Ran said, "He wouldn't agree to it, so the landlord's son locked him and the dead girl inside the mill, and ran off to report it to the authorities."

"This oxherd boy has got a history; when he was young he randomly beat the County Master's dog to death, then later he stole a guest's snuff bottle, and this time, he sexually harassed a common girl. Naturally, his crimes could not be absolved. No one was willing to listen to him explain himself. He was caught red-handed with all the evidence, so he was arrested."

Chu Wanning widened his eyes, "...And then?"

"And then, he stayed in jail for a few months. When autumn came, he was sentenced to the death penalty, to be sent to the execution platform outside the city. As he followed along the execution troop winding around the fields, he suddenly saw someone was butchering an ox not far in the distance. He could tell with just a glance; that ox was the one he had taken to graze since he was young, but now that it was old, it didn't have the energy to plow the fields anymore. But that ox had to graze grass. If it only ate but didn't do any labour, why would the landlord want to keep it? It helped them plow a lifetime's worth of fields, but in the end, they were going to butcher it, eat its meat."

Even as he told such a cruel thing, Mo Ran wasn't sad, and smiled, "But that oxherd boy had grown up riding on the back of that ox, had told it many of his secrets, fed it hay, hugged its neck and cried when he was wronged, and took it for his only family in this world."

"So, he knelt down and begged the executioner to let him go bid farewell to that ox. Of course the executioner didn't believe there'd be any feelings between man and beasts, so he thought the boy was only trying to play tricks and didn't allow it."

"...And then?"

"And then? And then that oxherd boy was hung to death. The ox was butchered. Hot blood flowed all over the ground, and those who gathered to watch the show dispersed. That night, the landlord's household ate beef, but the beef was old and kept getting stuck between their teeth. They had a bit, didn't like it, and dumped everything."

Chu Wanning: "..."

Mo Ran flipped over, smiled happily at him, "There, it's done. How was it?"

"Get out." Chu Wanning said.

"Hey, the first time I made this up for myself I cried. Your heart is so cold, not even a drop of tear."

"It's you who told it so badly..."

Mo Ran haha-ed twice, put his arm over his little shidi's shoulder, and caressed his hair, "Well that can't be helped. Your shixiong is only so talented. Alright, the story's done. Let's sleep."

Chu Wanning didn't acknowledge him, but after a long time, he suddenly asked, "Mo Ran."

"Call me shixiong."

"Why is the story called Ox Eats Grass?"

"Because like people, an ox has gotta eat. For the sake of eating, a lot of work has to be done. If one day you can't work anymore, then no one cares if you're alive or dead."

Chu Wanning stopped talking again.

The whisperings in the yard were the small voices of those seeking refuge, and once in a while, there'd be an ominous cry or two from ghosts and demons coming from outside the barrier.

"Mo Ran."

"Aiyah, so cheeky. Call me shixiong."

Chu Wanning ignored him, and only asked, "Does that child really exist?"

"No." Mo Ran was quiet for a moment, then suddenly smiled, his dimples deep and good looking. He rolled the little guy into his arms and said warmly, "Of course it's made up to play with you. Be good. Sleep."

Yet unexpectedly, it hadn't been long before there was suddenly commotion in the yard.

Someone was shouting angrily, "ASKING FOR THE GONGZI ALL OVER! THE GONGZI IS BUSY, WHO HAS THE TIME TO MIND YOUR BUSINESS? CLEAN THAT CORPSE OUT! DON'T YOU KNOW THE ONES WITH BLUE SPOTS WILL RISE?! ARE YOU TRYING TO KILL US ALL??!"

This voice was like thunder in the middle of a dark night, and the moment "rising corpse" was mentioned, everyone blew up. All of a sudden, everyone who was asleep sat up, and looked to where the commotion was.

Mo Ran blocked in front of his little shidi and threw a glance, frowning as he spoke in a low voice, "Hm? It's that person from noon earlier?"

The one who was kneeling and being scolded was indeed that youth named XiaoMan from noon earlier that day. He was still wearing the tight suit from during the day, but his spirit and aura were completely different.

It was as if his entire person was emptied out, only hugging tightly onto the dead body of his foster father. That corpse's nails had grown significantly, the very sign of a corpse rising. When the others saw, they all backed away. The Governor's administrator was scolding him sharply.

"Your dad was my colleague, I feel bad about him being killed too. But so what? You were the one who cried hunger last night so he went out to find food for you. You were the one who caused your dad to die, so are you going to cause us all to die now?"

XiaoMan was kneeling on the ground, his hair completely disheveled, his eyes red, "N-no, I'm not... dad, daddy. Please I beg you, let me see the gongzi, the gongzi has a way for dad's corpse not to rise, I want to bury dad properly, please I beg you all not to... don't dismember him... Sob..."

By the time he uttered the word "dismember" he was already sobbing really hard. He buried his face in his palms, wiping messily, his lips trembling, "Please I beg you all... let me wait until the gongzi is back..."

"It's going to be midnight soon, the gongzi is out, so how can he possibly care for your business? You know that normal corpses can still be purified, but your dad's bluing spots and nails have already changed, so how can he possibly hold out until the gongzi is back?"

"No... He can, Uncle Liu... I'm begging you, I'll do anything for you, I-I'll think of a way to repay you after, please I beg you, don't touch my daddy... beg, I... I beg you..."

Seeing him beg like this, that middle aged administrator let out a long sigh, the rims of his eyes also turning red, but still he replied, "Sigh, do you know, you're asking for all of our lives here — GUARDS!"

"NO! DON'T!!"

But it was already too late. No one would go help him. Anyone knew that if this corpse was kept, then when midnight comes it would for sure turn into a ferocious spirit.

The corpse of XiaoMan's foster father was forcibly dragged away, to be dismembered outside. XiaoMan was held back by several people on his left and right, and his bitter tears flowed viciously, sullying his entire face, and beast-like howls escaped his lips. But in the end, he was still half pulled, half dragged away into the distance.

Once this storm had past, the yard returned to its peaceful quiet after some muttered whispers.

Chu Wanning however, did not fall back asleep. He hung his head pensively.

Mo Ran side-gazed at his little shidi, "What are you thinking about?"

"This person lost his close family bitterly and did such a foolish thing. That his foster father's body was overtaken, of course he'd blame the others. I have an uncertain guess. I'm wondering, could LinAn City's botched migration be because of him."

Mo Ran replied without missing a beat, "I thought about this too."

Chu Wanning shook his head, "But it's too early to tell, we can't make any conclusive claims. Let's keep a close eye on him first."

Ch.66 This Venerable One Sees the Heavenly Rift for the First Time

Day two. Nothing unusual had happened.

Chu Xun sent guards to tally the number of straw men in the city, make sure that it matches the number of people, while the people busied themselves packing what few possessions they had. Just one more night, and then they will leave first thing in the morning to take refuge at PuTuo according to Chu Xun's plan.

Mo Ran sat by the gate of the governor's residence, watching the people come and go. He sighed: "Chu Xun's plan is watertight; without someone leaking the info, the average ghost wouldn't have the brains to figure out that it's all decoy puppets left in the city. Someone must have told, then. Shidi, what do you think?"

No response.

"Eh? Shidi?"

Mo Ran turned around. Without him noticing, his little shidi had wandered off to watch a cavalry of riders getting ready, and in his place was Chu-gongzi's son,

sitting with his cheeks in hand.

"Da-gege....."

Mo Ran almost jumped at his sudden appearance: "What is it?"

The little guy pointed at an old paulownia tree to the side with a kite dangling from a high branch, articulating with some difficulty: "Mama gave it to me, it got stuck, can't reach. Da-gege help me?"

"No prob no prob." Mo Ran leapt nimbly to the top of the tree using light footwork, retrieved the butterfly-shaped kite, and landed steadily back on the ground, smiling as he gave it back, "Here you go, don't lose it again, okay?"

The little guy nodded.

Mo Ran watched him wandering around all alone for a bit, thinking about how Chu Xun probably doesn't have the time to look after his son, so he asked: "Where's your mom? It's a bit messy here, I'll take you to your mom."

"Mama? Mama is at the mountains in the back."

Mo Ran, mystified: "What's she doing in the mountains?"

"Sleeping." The little guy looked at him guilelessly and answered in a soft voice, "Mama's always sleeping there. Papa takes me to see her when the flowers bloom in the spring."

"Ah." Mo Ran uttered quietly, at a loss for words.

But the little guy didn't mind; he was still too young to understand what death meant. He played happily with the kite in his hands for a bit, then looked up at Mo Ran and shuffled over, saying in a whisper: "Gege, thank you, I'll give you..... I have something to give you."

He dug around in his pocket as he spoke, and finally dug out a small, half-piece of pastry wrapped in reed leaf.

No one in the city had enough to eat these days, it was a mystery how the little guy managed to save a piece of pastry. He broke it in half, and handed the smaller piece to Mo Ran.

"Da-gege, for you..... shh, don't tell anyone else, I don't have any more."

Mo Ran was just about to accept it when the little guy suddenly changed his mind and took the smaller piece back, offering him the bigger half instead.

"It's really yummy, there's sweet bean paste inside."

The small act made Mo Ran's heart feel all warm and fuzzy; he was used to being treated poorly, but didn't quite know how to respond to kindness. He reached out and took the sweet with a mumbled thanks. The little guy seemed quite pleased, grinning brightly, the curve of his dark eyelashes filled with warmth and kindness.

Mo Ran couldn't bear to eat the flower cake, so he wrapped it up using a leaf from the paulownia tree and tucked it into his robes. He was going to talk some more with the little guy, but he was a little kid with a little kid's attention span after all, and had already bounced away into the distance.

Chu Wanning came back around then, only to see Mo Ran standing there staring off into space. He raised an eyebrow: "What's up?"

Mo Ran watched the little guy disappear into the distance, sighing: "I was just thinking, all these people..... how come they all had to die?"

Night descended. Dark clouds covered the skies, with occasional bolts of lightning ripping through the heavens, and as the night grew deeper, a terrible gale howled amidst a torrential downpour.

Rain and its attendant Yin energy enhanced the powers of ghosts and other fiends; Chu Xun gathered all the survivors of Lin'an near the residence, and bid them stay inside the Shangqing barrier at all times.

Due to the rain, many of the areas that could usually make do as a resting place no longer served.

Mo Ran was keeping an eye on Xiao Man, but then more and more people crowded inside to take shelter from the rain, and Xiao Man ducked out of view.

Mo Ran muttered: "Damn."

Chu Wanning was small, and immediately said: "I'll go after him."

Saying that, he dove into the crowd and disappeared in no time.

He returned after a while with an irate expression: "He got away."

"Outside the barrier?"

"Mn."

Mo Ran fell silent, looking at the downpour outside and the people bustling to and fro.

All of it was only an illusion of things that had already come to pass two hundred years ago.

But he suddenly felt so wretched; the people around him had such hope on their faces, believing that Chu Xun will take them away from this ghost-infested hell to go to PuTuo just as soon as dawn breaks. In the pouring rain, guards dressed in white and red were putting their everything into making the final preparations so that they will be ready to move at daybreak.

None of them knew how little time they had left.

The night grew later still, and the noise died down as people dozed off, leaning against each other.

But Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were wide awake. Their task was to wait for the Ghost King to appear and to kill him. Since Xiao Man had already left the barrier, the turning point must be tonight.

Mo Ran turned to glance at Chu Wanning: "Why don't you get some rest, I'll wake you if anything happens."

Chu Wanning: "I'm not sleepy."

Mo Ran stroked his hair: "Then eat something? We haven't eaten since coming here."

"I'm....." Looking at the pastry Mo Ran took out, the words 'not hungry' got replaced by a gulp.

Mo Ran handed it over: "Here you go."

Chu Wanning accepted the sweet and broke it in half, giving the bigger half back to Mo Ran and keeping the smaller portion for himself. Mo Ran stared blankly at him, face unreadable.

Chu Wanning took a bite, uttered a questioning 'hm?' then asked: "Is this from the Peach Blossom Springs? The flavor is a bit different from the ones before."

"How so?"

"It tastes of osmanthus flowers."

Mo Ran forced a smile: "Oh? Chu Xun's son gave it to me, it's probably Lin'an flavored."

"It is indeed Lin'an flavored." Chu Wanning was opening his mouth to take another bite when he froze abruptly as if suddenly having realized something, and all the color drained from his face.

"That's not right!"

Chu Wanning shot to his feet, eyes wide and expression ghastly.

Mo Ran hadn't the slightest what the problem was: "What's not right?"

Chu Wanning didn't answer, instead walking into the courtyard and looking around in the pouring rain before picking up a sharp rock and cutting firmly into his own arm; blood gushed out instantly.

Mo Ran grabbed him in a hurry: "Are you crazy?"

Mo Ran stared at the blood trickling down his arm for a while before his head snapped up, eyes intense: "Have you still not caught on?" He said harshly, "Someone's trying to maim us!"

Blood ran down his arm non-stop, crimson diluted by the rain.

Chu Wanning's face was pale in the deluge, his dark brows knitted tightly together, drenched through and through in the ceaseless downpour.

Thunder rumbled and lightning split the skies, harsh light turning night into day for an instant.

The sudden clap of thunder jolted Mo Ran into realization. He subconsciously took a step back.

He knew what wasn't right.

Nothing in an illusion was real, however realist it might seem.

It should be impossible for a pastry to have any taste, for a weapon to actually cause an injury. In short—it should be impossible for anything within the illusion to affect them.

"Someone actualized the illusion." Chu Wanning said quietly.

Actualizing an illusion, also known as "illusion manifestation", was no easy task. The ones most skilled in this technique were those of the Guyue'ye Sect, whose motto was "Medicine for the people, divine physician for the heart", the latter half referring to the fact that some among them specialize in the art of actualizing illusions—many people are unable to accept the passing of a loved one; through illusion manifestation, the dead can yet accompany the living.

However, such manifested illusions were extremely difficult, so generally speaking, only short, individual scenes could be created, such as sharing a drink or taking a nap together, just one thing at most.

But with the extensive and continuous nature of this illusion constructed by the feathered tribe, alongside the large variety of happenings, even Guyue'ye's own sect leader might not be able to manifest it all.

Mo Ran immediately thought of someone—could it be that fake Gouchen from Jincheng lake?

But before he could think on it further, a strange sound burst forth from the skies above.

The dozing people jolted awake like startled birds, looking around with wide eyes before finally looking up.

It was deathly silent for a moment, then screams erupted like the explosion of water droplets in boiling oil.

Everyone tried to flee every which way, only to discover there was nowhere to go, and screams came from all directions. There was a fracture in the sky, and an enormous, blood-red ghost eye was staring unnervingly from right above.

The eye was so close it was practically up against the barrier.

A harsh, garbled voice thundered: "Chu Xun, how very bold of you, a mere mortal daring to deceive this Venerable One."

Mo Ran muttered: "Ghost King....."

There were nine kings in the ghost realm, some far stronger than others. The one before them now had yet to show himself, so there was no way to tell which one he was. That eyeball alone loomed in the sky, dripping with blood as it stared at the building below: "Such arrogance, absurd! Pathetic mortal—you want to save them? I might not have wiped out the city before, but since you wish to go against me—I'll kill every single one of you! None shall be spared!"

With a shrill shriek, a blinding red light burst forth from the ghost eye, aimed directly at the barrier!

Red clashed against gold and for an instant all the other colors of the world ceased to be. The force of the impact sent debris flying into the howling gales and relentless rain, the branches of the trees in the courtyard snapping one after another. The people inside the barrier were hysterical, wailing as they huddled together.

The Shangqing barrier withstood the first hit, but another flash of red followed immediately after, striking the same spot. The barrier held out, but a crack appeared.

"How arrogant—insufferable!!!"

The red light struck again and again, impacts thundering and sparks flying. Seeing the barrier on the edge of collapse, Chu Wanning's blood ran cold—now that the illusion has been actualized, an attack in here would be no different from one in the real world. If that attack were to land, both Mo Ran and himself might die here!

Golden light gathered at his fingertips.

This would surely blow his cover, but the situation being what it was, there was no other choice. He was just about to summon Tianwen and get it over with when a resplendent bolt of light flew across the sky like an arrow, headed directly for the epicenter of the cracks in the barrier!

The crowd turned to see Chu Xun standing on a tall roof.

He cradled a phoenix harp, fingertips dancing across its strings and sending bolts of light sweeping forth to gather at the barrier, each sound sharp and powerful as the rupturing of metal, instantly reinforcing the Shangqing barrier that was on the verge of failing.

"Gongzi is here!"

"Gongzi!"

The people below exclaimed one after another, some even crying with joy. Chu Xun held his own against the eye of the Ghost King, the two already having exchanged a hundred moves in an instant, the Ghost King completely unable to encroach on the barrier.

The cold voice rang even more menacingly across the sky.

"Chu Xun, with your skills, you could have easily escaped by yourself. Why do you insist on meddling in unrelated matters and making an enemy of the ghost realm!"

"Your majesty wishes harm upon my citizens, how could anything be less unrelated to me?"

"Ridiculous! We ghosts feed on the souls of the living, there is no difference between us eating souls and you eating meat! You will understand soon enough, once you're dead!"

Chu Xun didn't miss a beat, the notes of the harp never pausing: "Then we will just have to see if your majesty can take this head on my shoulders."

As he spoke, the chords beneath his fingers rose to a crescendo until a brilliant light pierced through the heavens right into that bloody eye in the sky!

"AH——!!!!!"

The terrifying scream shook the very ground they stood on.

Fetid blood sprayed out from where the eye had been burned by Chu Xun's spell, the downpour of blood mixing with the shrill shrieks. In his anger, the Ghost King unleashed a blade of light many times stronger than those before, striking out amidst the rain of blood. Chu Xun moved to block, but this attack was unlike the others, and the force of the impact forced him back several steps, the notes of his harp stuttering.

"Gongzi——!"

"Crack! There's a crack! The barrier is going to break!"

"Mama——Mama——"

The crowd panicked; those with families huddled together crying, those without cowered in corners trembling.

Chu Xun grit his teeth, fire in his eyes, refusing to give up so easily. Just as he was locked in stalemate with the Ghost King, lights flared to life on either side of him. He glanced to the side to see Mo Ran and Chu Wanning standing with him, scarlet and golden light flowing steadily into his own, once again sealing the barrier.

A terrifying roar came from above.

The ghost eye disappeared.

The three of them descended to the ground. The sky rained rotten blood for a while longer before finally returning to clear water.

Chu Xun, face pale, bowed to Mo Ran and Chu Wanning: "Many thanks for your help."

"Don't mention it." Mo Ran waved his hands, "Go get some rest, you look terrible."

Chu Xun nodded, he had indeed burned through too much of his reserves, so Mo Ran supported him to the corridor. The people that were in disarray only a moment ago, seeing that Chu-gongzi had repaired the barrier and saved them, all gathered in gratitude, offering him water and draping clothing over his shoulders.

Someone said: "Chu-gongzi, you're all drenched, please go warm yourself by the fire."

Chu Xun thanked them one by one, but was really too exhausted to move, and so could only turn down that person's invitation. Undaunted, the people carried branches over and made a bonfire next to him instead.

Things gradually quieted down, save for the crackling of the fire. Suddenly, someone asked: "Gongzi, we took so many precautions, but the Ghost King still somehow saw through it all..... ai, what should we do?"

"Yeah, yeah....."

"How did they know we were going to leave? Gongzi said these ghosts can't tell the puppets apart from real people, so how did this happen..... could it be....." The person's voice died down and he snuck a glance toward Chu Xun, clearly wanting to say that maybe Chu Xun was wrong, maybe he messed something up somewhere.

The white-attired guards saw that glance, and one of them immediately rebuked with furrowed brows: "What are you trying to say! It's obviously because someone couldn't keep their trap shut and leaked the plan to the Ghost King!"

The person mumbled: "Who would tattle to the ghosts though? It's not like there's anything to be gained from that....." And then, seeing all the angry glares directed his way, he stopped talking, disgruntled.

A while passed in silence before someone else asked:

"Gongzi, that damn ghost definitely won't just leave it at that, what should we do?"

Chu Xun, exhausted, didn't open his eyes, but his voice was gentle still: "We just have to hold out until dawn and then be on our way, there's nothing they can do in the daylight."

"But we have so many people, the elderly, the young, and some injured too, can we make it to PuTuo Mountain in one day?"

Chu Xun, softly: "Don't worry about that. Get some rest. Just focus on the journey tomorrow, I'll take care of the rest."

Chu-gongzi had always protected them; since he said so, everyone listened and did as told. A little kid came over holding a piece of sesame candy and offered it to Chu Xun. Chu Xun opened his eyes slightly and pat his head with a smile, and was just about to say something when a guard ran over in a panic, shouting: "Gongzi! Gongzi, it's terrible!"

"What happened?"

"The little gongzi, little gongzi——Xiao Man——outside the ChengHuang Temple——" The guard was in too much shock to even speak a complete sentence; he stammered some more, then abruptly fell to his knees and started crying miserably.

Chu Xun shot to his feet, what little color remaining on his face draining completely as he rushed into the rain.

Ch.67 This Venerable One's Heartfelt Anguish

>>gore, cannibalism, emotionaldistress.gif

ChengHuang Temple stood at the very edge of the extent of Chu Xun's powers; the barrier reached to the stairs of the temple, but no further.

Inside the temple, candles flickered weakly.

A dozen ghosts that had cultivated corporeal forms lined either side, and in between them, tied up with her back to them, was a woman in red, her head tilted back as she gazed up at the statue on the altar.

And next to her with his eyes downcast stood Xiao Man, holding firmly onto a young child.

Chu Xun cried out: "Lan-er!"

The child was none other than Chu Xun's son, Chu Lan. Mo Ran's heart lurched at the sight of the little guy in trouble; he could still taste the pastry on his tongue. He made to go over, but was blocked by Chu Wanning.

"Don't go."

"Why not!"

Chu Wanning glanced at him, then said, quietly: "They've all died already, two hundred years ago. The illusion has been actualized, I don't want you to get hurt."

"....." It was the truth—no matter what he did now, the dead have already gone, there was no way to change any of it.

The little guy wailed from outside the barrier, nearly unintelligible: "Papa! Papa help me! Papa please help Lan-er!"

Chu Xun's lips trembled. He yelled toward Xiao Man: "What are you doing? I've never done you wrong, let him go!"

Xiao Man ignored him, head still lowered as if he had heard none of it. But the hands clutching Chu Lan betrayed his inner hesitation—there was a mole between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand, and his hands trembled without stop, the veins on the backs of them standing out starkly.

By now, everyone else taking refuge at the governor's residence had arrived as well, all of them aghast and furious at the sight within the temple, murmuring:

"That's the gongzi's son....."

"How could this happen....."

Xiao Man cut the ropes binding the red-robed woman in one motion. She seemed to come back to her senses and turned slowly around—she was beautiful, pure as a lotus flower, her neck long and elegant, but her face was paper-pale and her lips were tinted red like blood, and the smile she directed toward Chu Xun was more terrifying than it was lovely.

The low light of the candles lit up her face. The moment they saw, Chu Xun and those behind him old enough to know all froze.

There was sadness in her smile. Softly, she said: "Husband."

Mo Ran: "!!!!"

Chu Wanning: "....."

The woman was none other than Chu Xun's deceased wife!

Madam Chu looked to her side and immediately reached over to take her son back from Xiao Man. Xiao Man was unwilling, but Madam Chu was a ghost now, much stronger than he was now that she had been freed from the bindings, and easily pulled the child out of his grasp. But she had died of illness before her child was even a month old, so the little guy had never seen his mother and only kept crying for his father to save him.

"Be a good boy and don't cry anymore, mama will take you to your papa."

Madam Chu picked the child up in her delicate arms and slowly walked out of the temple, down the rain-soaked stone steps, to the edge of the Shangqing barrier. She stood facing Chu Xun, joy mixed with sorrow.

"My husband, it's been a long time. Have.....have you been well?"

Chu Xun couldn't speak. The tips of his fingers shook uncontrollably at his sides as those phoenix eyes stared at the woman behind the barrier, rims slowly turning red.

Madam Chu continued softly: "Lan-er has gotten so big already, and you've grown steadier too, a little different from what I remember..... let me take a good look at you."

She reached out, her hand pressed against the barrier—she couldn't cross, not with her body being that of a ghost, could only gaze quietly across the flowing colors of the barrier at the person on the other side.

Chu Xun closed his eyes, wetness clinging to his lashes.

He pressed his hand to hers, separated by the barrier, then opened his eyes. The two of them gazed at each other, across life and death, as the day before.

Chu Xun choked back a sob: "Wife....."

The family had been separated by life and death for many years, but the amount of time they got to spend together could be counted on one hand.

"The haitang tree I planted in the courtyard that year, did it take root?"

Chu Xun smiled with watery eyes: "It's already grown tall and beautiful."

Madam Chu, smiling gently: "I'm glad."

Chu Xun tried his best to keep smiling as well: "Lan-er loves that haitang tree, he's always playing under it in the springs. He likes haitang flowers, just like you, every.....every year, during QingMing^[5]....." Unable to keep up the act any longer, he pressed his forehead against the barrier, tears falling without cease, voice breaking, "Every year, during QingMing, he would always pick the prettiest flower to put before your grave. Wan'er, Wan'er, did you see? Every.....every year, did you see?"

He was wracked with sobs by the end, every word bleeding misery, until his composure finally fell apart altogether.

Madam Chu's eyes also grew red; she was a ghost and had no tears to shed, but her miserable expression was no less unsettling to the onlookers.

For a moment all were silent, everyone wordlessly watching the scene before them, and someone was weeping quietly.

But just then, a cold voice rang out from above.

"Of course she knows. But not for long."

Mo Ran's face changed immediately: "It's the Ghost King!"

Chu Wanning's expression was dark as well: "This coward won't even show himself, shameless!"

The Ghost King's laugh sounded like nails against metal, making their blood run cold.

"Lin Wan'er is one of us ghosts now. I didn't want to hurt her, but since you're so set on opposing me and even ruined one of my eyes, I'll just have to dig out your heart, inflict a worse pain on you!"

At his words, the ghosts in the temple began chanting incantations.
"The heart is no more, let the past be erased——"

Madam Chu's eyes shot wide open and her voice shook: "Husband, Lan-er, take Lan-er!!!!"

"The heart is no more, let relations be severed——"

"Lan-er! Quickly! Go to your papa!!"

Madam Chu tried to push her child across the barrier, but the thin layer of light kept him out as if he was a ghost.

Xiao Man looked down at them from where he stood by the railing of the temple; his face, originally charming, twisted with a mixture of sorrow and glee.

"It's useless. I put a ghost mark on him as instructed by the Ghost King. He's just like a ghost now, the barrier won't let him in."

Behind them, the incantation rose like a tide: "The heart is no more, let reason be shattered——"

"Husband!!" Madam Chu was already panicked beyond measure, clutching her child to herself and banging against the barrier, "Husband, take the barrier down, take it down, let Lan-er in, you have to protect him, you have to protect him——I——I'm almost.....I....."

"The heart is no more, let compassion be smothered——"

"HUSBAND——!!!!!"

Madam Chu fell to her knees, her eyes wide as her whole body shook uncontrollably, curse marks in the color of blood climbing slowly up her face, "Our child——Lan-er.....you promised me, you promised me you'd take care of him.....take it down..... please, I'm begging you..... take it down..... husband!!!!"

Chu Xun felt as if his insides were being ripped apart. Several times his hand lifted to dispel the barrier, only to fall back down in the end.

Outside the barrier, Chu Lan was bawling loudly, looking up at him with a tear-stained face, his little hands reaching for him: "Papa doesn't.....want Lan-er anymore.....? Lan-er wants Papa..... Papa hold me....."

Madam Chu held him tightly in her arms, kissing his cheek. The pair of mother and son, one kneeling, one crying, both begging Chu Xun to take down the Shangqing barrier and let the child in.

Suddenly, someone in the crowd yelled: "Gongzi, you can't! You can't drop the barrier, that would doom all the hundreds of people left in Lin'an——that's the ghosts' ploy! Gongzi! You can't drop the barrier!"

"That's right, the barrier must be kept up!" The desire to live made the common people kneel one after another and grovel toward Chu Xun, pleading, "Gongzi, please, you can't take down the barrier, or everyone will die!"

"Madam, please....." One of them got down and bowed toward Madam Chu, "Madam, please have mercy, please be benevolent, we will be grateful to you forever, please don't make gongzi take down the barrier, you were always so compassionate, please, we're begging you....."

In an instant, other than the guards and a handful of the common people, everyone else was on their knees begging and crying, their voices drowning out those of Madam Chu and her son on the outside of the barrier.

Chu Xun felt like he was standing on the point of a needle and being stabbed by a thousand thousand sharp knives, each blade growing barbs inside his flesh and tearing through his organs.

Before him were his wife and son, behind him were the lives of hundreds.

Tormented so, he felt as if he had already died, as if he had been swallowed by blazes and burnt to ashes.

But the chanting continued on, even more piercing than before.

"The heart is no more, let emotion be expunged——"

"The heart is no more, let desire be dissipated——"

More and more curse marks climbed up Madam Chu's fair neck, nearly covering her entire face, and beginning to bleed into her eyes.

She could hardly even speak anymore, only staring at her husband in despair as she strained to utter:

"If you..... I..... will..... hate you..... take..... take Lan-er..... I hate..... I....."

The curse marks oozed into her pupils. Her entire body shuddered, as if in agony, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"I——HATE!!!!!"

A wretched scream tore through the air, but the end of it turned into a beast-like cry!

Madam Chu's eyes flew open. Her gentle, almond-shaped eyes were stained the color of blood, and the whites of her eyes were all gone, for there were now four pupils in each eye.

"Wan'er!!!"

Chu Xun cried out with boundless sorrow, forgetting for a moment that the Shangqing barrier required its caster to remain inside, wanting only to be with his wife. But just as he was about to step out of the barrier, an arrow pierced through the sky and firmly into his shoulder, and the arm he was raising dropped back down to his side.

It was a young man of the guard, still posed with bow in hand.

He said to Chu Xun, self-righteously: "Gongzi! Wake up! You've always taught us that the righteous put the people before the self, were those just pretty words? Will you toss away the lives of hundreds to save one person just as soon as it concerned yourself?!"

An old woman next to the young man said shakily: "P-put that bow down, how could you hurt the gongzi? Everything, everything is gongzi's choice, gongzi has already done his utmost, how, how could you..... how could you be so ungrateful!!"

As they argued, cries of fear suddenly broke out in front.

Madam Chu had completely turned. She had held her child with such love only a moment ago, but she was no different from a beast now, howling toward the sky with saliva dripping from her mouth, her teeth growing longer by the second.

And in her arms, Chu Lan's voice had gone hoarse from crying, but in between sobs he still called out: "Mama....."

What answered him were Madam Chu's blood-red claws, piercing straight through his throat!!!!

All sound disappeared from the world.

Droplets of blood drifted through the air like so many blossoms.

Just like that year, when Madam Chu had stood by the window holding her newborn child, watching the petals of newly bloomed haitang flowers dancing in the courtyard.

She had cradled the child gently in her arms, singing softly: "Red haitang, yellow haitang, floating gently in the wind. Children in a land far away, missing their mom and dad."

Red haitang..... yellow haitang.....

The hand that had caressed Chu Lan so tenderly that year tore into his skull, his limbs, his flesh.

Floating gently in the wind.

The rain came down in a deluge, blood pooling and flowing along the ground. The mother devoured her child's entrails.

Children in a land far away.

The eaves of ChengHuang Temple towered solemnly above them.

The year Chu Lan was born, she had knelt before ChengHuang Temple and clasped her delicate, warm hands together in prayer. The chime of a clock had sent all the birds nearby scattering, and in the haze of the fragrant candles, she bowed down low to pray for her child's health and happiness, that he might live a long life free from worries.....

Missing their mom and dad.

Chu Lan's heart was dug out from his mangled body. Madam Chu sunk her teeth into it, insatiable, blood dripping from the corners of her mouth.

"AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHH!!!!" Chu Xun broke down, clutching his head where he had fallen to his knees, bashing his head repeatedly against the ground. He wept, wretched and miserable, kneeling in the rain in the blood in front of his wife and son in front of all the people of Lin'an, he knelt before the image of god, he knelt in the mud underfoot.

He knelt in the depths of sin, he knelt in the heights of virtue.

He knelt in untold gratitude, he knelt in utmost hatred.

He hunched over in the dust, his very soul torn apart and extinguished.

Disintegrated into dust.

A long while passed before someone finally spoke up in a trembling voice.

"Gongzi....."

"Gongzi, condolences....."

"Gongzi's benevolence will not be forgotten....."

"Chu-gongzi is righteous, truly a kind person! Truly a kind person....."

Someone had pulled their own child close and covered his eyes so that he wouldn't see the bloody scene, only just now letting go to say to Chu Xun: "Gongzi, you saved all of our lives. The madam and the little gongzi, they'll..... they'll surely ascend to paradise....."

Someone else spit out: "Take your child and get lost! Why didn't you and your child go to paradise instead?!"

That person backed away timidly.

But all of it sounded so far away. Chu Xun felt like he had already died. The voices sounded as if they came from across an ocean, from across a life.

In the torrential downpour, the man was covered in mud, that thin layer of transparent light separating him from his wife and son, the dead on one side, the dying on the other. Looking at the scene before him, Mo Ran thought suddenly of his past life, when he had wantonly slaughtered the innocent, and wondered if he had created more than one Chu Xun, more than one Chu Lan, more than one Madam Chu.....

He looked down at his hands.

For a split second, his hands looked as if they were covered in blood.

But then he blinked, and it was only the ice-cold rain gathering in his palms and flowing down his hands.

He trembled.

But in the next moment, a warm hand took his.

He snapped out of it like waking from a nightmare to find his little shidi looking at him with concern. He looked so much like Chu Lan.

Mo Ran slowly knelt down to be eye level with him, like a sinner begging forgiveness from the souls of the dead, looking at him with eyes watery with rain and tears both.

Chu Wanning said nothing, only reached up and pat him on the head.

"It's already happened." Chu Wanning said softly, "It's all in the past already."

"You're right." A while passed before Mo Ran wrangled out a sad smile. Lowering his lashes, he muttered, "It's all in the past already."

But even if it was all in the past already, it was all still things he had done. He hadn't killed Chu Lan, but how many people just like Chu Lan had died because of him?

The more he thought about it, the more scared he was, the more it hurt.
Why had he been so cruel..... why had he been so willfull.....

Ch.68 This Venerable One Can't Bear it

>>more gore toward the end

Chu Lan was dead, but the illusion continued.

Dawn was still hours away, the long nightmare not yet over. The survivors returned to the residence, preparing to leave for PuTuo Mountain as soon as the morning light breaks.

It was hard to believe that someone could still carry on after suffering that kind of pain. If truth be told, it really did seem like all that remained of Chu Xun was a walking husk, his soul long since gone.

Mo Ran walked around the city and heard many people fretting—after all, Chu Xun had suffered so much that, leaving aside the possibility that he might be holding a grudge, even if he was still willing to lead everyone away from here, their chances were significantly diminished with him in such a state.

But not everyone thought only of themselves; it wasn't many, but at least there were a few people who were genuinely sad for Chu Xun.

They stewed in anxiety as they waited for the sky to brighten.
But what arrived before the rising sun was that cold, now-familiar voice, rupturing the heavy night sky and reverberating above the barrier.

This time the Ghost King addressed not Chu Xun, but everyone else in the city.

"The sun will rise soon. This Venerable One knows the lot of you plan to leave once it's daytime. But have you really thought it through? PuTuo is a long way from here, there's no way for you to make it there in only one day. Once night falls, all of you will have to depend on Chu Xun for protection. But do you think Chu Xun will protect you?"

"Mommy——"

A child started crying from fear at the terrifying voice, burrowing into his mother's arms. Everyone was looking up at the sky.

Only Chu Xun, standing in front of the residence and leaning against the haitang tree, had his eyes closed as if hearing nothing.

"His wife and son are dead because of the lot of you. Do you really think Chu Xun would actually protect you? He probably has something else in mind to avenge his family, something to make you lot *wish* you were dead. It's only human nature, after all..... this Venerable One was once human too, you know. Sure there are kind people, but they're only doing it for their reputation. Humans are vile by nature, any so-called good person is just trying to get something out of it. But let's be honest, once forced into a corner, they're not gonna care about whether other people live or die."

The Ghost King's eerie voice echoed from above them.

"This Venerable One has already said it before, but I wasn't going to take all of your lives. In fact, the living can serve us ghosts. If you don't believe me, just look at him——"

As he spoke, a black cloud billowed toward the barrier with Xiao Man standing on top. And, next to him, a kindly man of about forty or fifty.

Someone called out in surprise: "That's Xiao Man's father!"

"It's Xiao Man's father! Didn't he die?"

"Even his body was dismembered, everyone saw. How could this be?!"

The Ghost King continued: "As one of the nine kings of the underworld, even if this Venerable One does not exert control over life and death like Emperor YanLuo does, something like restoring the appearance of the dead is but a simple matter. If you serve me, I will grant you the lasting company of your deceased loved ones. But if you oppose me, you will end up like your Chugongzi, watching your wife kill your child with your own eyes, powerless to do anything about it."

All were silent within the barrier.

"Will you really trust him? Trust that he won't take revenge for his wife and child?"

"Do you really think he will take you from here all the way to PuTuo?"

Someone glanced toward Chu Xun, eyes already flickering with malice.

Chu Xun finally looked up from where he stood under the flowering tree to level them with a quiet gaze. He really didn't know what to even say at this point;

a long while passed before he finally said: "It is already what it is, what would be the point in maiming you now."

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA——" The Ghost King's ghastly laugh echoed from above the barrier, "Very good, very good, he says he won't harm you. If you believe him, then go ahead and go with him. But if you believe me——"

His voice thundered with increasing intensity, as if it might pierce through their eardrums straight into their hearts.

"If you believe me, you will be rewarded. I can bring back your families. All you have to do is hand over Chu Xun, you just have to——hand him over to me! My grudge is against him, not any of you. Hand him over, and you won't have to abandon your homes. Hand him over, and you can reunite with your family. Just hand him over, and it will all be over."

The Ghost King's voice grew faint.

"I will be waiting at ChengHuang Temple, until the sun rises."

The voice faded away.

An odd sort of racket emerged from the deathly silence as all eyes in the crowd looked over at Chu Xun. Chu Xun looked back at them with a calm, even expression.

Someone started muttering helplessly: "What should we do....."

"What should we do, husband, I'm so afraid....."

"Mommy I'm scared, I don't wanna get eaten!"

Someone else said in a low voice: "The Ghost King isn't wrong..... these supposedly kind people all just have ulterior motives, we've seen plenty of their kind before. Chu..... Chu-gongzi may not have done anything yet, but just look at him, half-dead the way he is, who's to say he won't do something crazy in the future!"

Another person, hearing his words, whispered in agreement: "You're right. For all we know, he's nursing that grudge and just waiting to get all of us killed! Treachery at the eleventh hour is hardly unheard of....."

Suddenly a rough-looking man stood out from the crowd and yelled: "Grab him! We can live if we hand him over!"

Everyone went silent. A few moments passed before a young woman stepped out and blocked in front of the man, her voice soft but determined: "How could you be so ungrateful? Have you no dignity as a man?"

"Piss off!" The man kicked the woman to the ground and spit on her face, "You're just a stupid whore that sleeps with men, no family to speak of, the hell you running your trap for? I have to take care of both young and old, I ain't gonna let my own family go through shit! Chu-gongzi, you're just gonna have to understand!"

And with that, he made to go capture Chu Xun.

But he hadn't even taken one step before his leg was firmly grabbed. He looked down and roared furiously: "Still getting in the way, you dumb whore? Go die by yourself if you want, how dare you try to drag everyone else down with you!"

The woman was no less enraged: "I may be a prostitute, but at least I can tell right from wrong. If even cats and dogs know to repay kindnesses, how could we humans not?!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

The man aimed his boots at her head until her entire face was mottled with bruises. By then, the rest of the crowd had also come closer and formed a circle around Chu Xun. A few among them tried to stop them like the woman from the brothel had, but it was a futile effort, like a single leaf caught in a raging current, swallowed in no time at all.

"Gongzi——Gongzi, hurry and get out of here!"

An old woman yelled shakily toward Chu Xun: "Chu-gongzi, go! Just go! Don't stay for the sake of these animals! Go!"

There was also the tender voice of a young child: "Stop fighting, mommy, daddy, don't hurt the gongzi, don't hurt him——"

A maelstrom of commotion, disorder and chaos.

Chu Xun stood alone in the rain. He felt as if he was looking at a horde of ghosts that had crawled out from the very depths of hell. For a moment, he did want to leave.

But then his gaze landed on those people, those living, breathing, crying people. He saw the young child, bawling as he tried to stop his parents. He saw the young woman who was the first to stand up for him, whose face was now bruised and swollen. He looked at the old woman shaking in the rain, and the other dozen or so people standing with their backs to him, trying their best to stop the others.

The foot that was about to leave paused.

They've done nothing wrong. If he takes down the barrier, these people will die too.

So it turns out that the most disgusting thing in this world weren't ghosts and demons, but those cowardly, worthless beasts wearing human skin hiding in the crowd, willing to say and to do anything just to ensure their own survival.

And, after it all, they would say: "I just wanted to live, I'm pitiful and powerless, I've done nothing wrong."

He had thought that the people he protected were all helpless, good people. But he was wrong.

Those beasts took off their human skins now, revealing their ugly, snarling, blood-red faces.....

They were so well hidden.....so well hidden.

He didn't want to cry and bleed for those beasts in human clothing anymore, but they were so sly, hidden so well amongst the good, kind people, their faces laughing at him, delighting in his powerlessness.

—*You have no choice but to save us; if you drop the barrier, we'll take the people you want to save, the people actually grateful to you, together with us to hell.*

You have no choice, however much it sickens you.

You chose to be virtuous, you chose to be a good person.

Since that's the choice you made, then it's only your duty to sacrifice yourself to save everyone else. If you refuse, then you're a swindler, a pretender, a fake, worse than animals.

It was as if he could hear those people howling, could hear their shrill laughter:

You have no choice. You have no choice!

In that frenzied pandemonium, in the tempest of rain and wind, Chu Xun slowly lifted his head toward the heavens.

Dawn was finally about to break.

The relentless downpour had washed the blood from the stone steps of the ChengHuang Temple. Chu Xun and those who had tried to protect him were all tied up, walking toward the temple.

The scene was both sorrowful and laughable; those people had tied Chu Xun up so tightly, smugly pleased that they had captured such a powerful person, completely unaware that Chu Xun could easily turn the ropes to ash with but a single spell.

But he didn't. Nor did he take down the Shangqing barrier.

Enough blood had been shed in Lin'an already. He didn't want any more innocent people to die just for his own revenge.

And so it was that the thin layer of light protected them all, both the thankless beasts that turned on him and the people who stood sincerely by his side. They arrived at the temple, but the Ghost King himself did not appear. Instead, there was a candle giving off a black smoke that twisted into a dark silhouette.

"Why——have you not dispelled the barrier!" The moment it saw Chu Xun, that voice flew into a rage, "Dispel the barrier!!!!"

Chu Xun said, calmly: "Over my dead body."

The black smoke let out a shrill shriek: "Chu Xun, you must be mad! You..... the lot of you——kill him, else I'll take all your lives as soon as night comes!"

Daybreak.

The first light of day lit up the endless night.

The Ghost King, unable to maintain his form in the daylight, fled into the darkness. The candle giving off the black smoke flickered and went out.

Chu Xun pulled himself together. ChengHuang Temple stood on tall ground; from here, he could see the morning mist shrouding gently about the mountains and the rivers, hiding the scars from view, and for a moment, everything looked like the days of old—it was a beautiful spring.

"Chu-gongzi, sorry."

"It's not that we're cruel and heartless or anything, it's just that the Ghost King holds a grudge against you for ruining his eye..... we have no other choice....."

"What're you all still yammering for! Don't drag it out, we don't want any surprises. I've got a family back there that wants to live! Who's more important, this one guy or all of us? The righteous put the people before the self, his words, not mine!"

Chu Wanning stood in the distance, looking at that person of unknown relation to himself, his feelings complicated.

Suddenly, a pair of hands covered his eyes.

Chu Wanning whispered: "What are you doing?"

"Not letting you see."

".....Why?"

"You'll be sad."

Chu Wanning was quiet for a while, his eyelashes trembling against the underside of Mo Ran's hands: "I won't. I've already said that it's all in the past, already, two hundred years ago."

Mo Ran sighed softly from behind him: ".....You little dummy, then why are my palms wet?"

He didn't know how long had passed: one incense stick [30 min], one shichen [2 hr], or only a split second.

Time blurred in this madness, this chaos.

When Chu Wanning opened his eyes again, the Shangqing barrier had dissipated. Chu Xun laid in a pool of blood, surrounded by people and by ghosts, by demons wearing human skin, inhaling the scent of fresh blood.

Ecstasy and guilt; calamity past, the rest of their lives now laid open. Agony and sin; the hearts of people, indistinguishable from those of beasts.

The air smelled like death.

The human realm—or perhaps hell.
It was difficult to tell.

Slowly, the crowd dispersed. There was no fear of ghosts during the day, so they went to find food, to rest, to wait for the Ghost King to come back at night and inspect the body in the temple and reward them the promised reunion with their deceased loved ones.

Slowly, only a dozen or so people remained in the temple, weeping in grief.

The young woman from the brothel was there, and the white-haired old woman. The young child, and his parents who had listened. A beggar, a scholar, a storyteller, a son of a once-wealthy family, a widow holding her infant son, a teacher, and a farmer.

No one else.

But just as they wept over his body, the man lying dead in a pool of his own blood slowly opened his eyes.

"Gongzi!"

"Chu-gongzi!"

Mo Ran's heart tremored. Unable to bear it, he said: "No..... this is....."

This spell was a lost art in the modern age, he hadn't expected to see it being used in this illusion.

"The Lingering Voice Spell. He's already dead, but he used this spell on himself before he died." Chu Wanning paused before continuing, "He still had unattended matters, things he was worried about."

Sure enough, Chu Xun's eyes were blank, pupils dilated, and his voice was flat when he spoke: "Demons and ghosts are treacherous, you must not believe their words. Without the Shangqing barrier, they will overrun the city once night falls and slaughter at will. Please leave this place and head to PuTuo."

"Gongzi....."

"I have already died, and will not be able to accompany you. But I have concentrated my entire lifetime of spiritual power into my spiritual core, bring it with you, and ghosts will not be able to approach."

They wept even more sorrowfully.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning's blood ran cold.

The spiritual core.....

It was a crystalline formation within the heart.....

Chu Xun's body slowly lifted its hand that had not yet gone stiff, and, under the control of the spell, grasped the knife buried in his chest and pulled it out.

And then—

“GONGZI!!!!!!” The people around him cried out with grief, their voices twisted and hoarse, soaked with tears, “Gongzi, what are you doing——!!!!”

With his own hands, he ripped open the gash in his chest, dug into his flesh, grabbed his heart that was no longer beating and slowly, inch by inch, tore it out.

Blood dripped from the heart, enveloped in a golden-red flame.

It was Chu Xun’s spiritual core, the last burst of light from a candle that had burned out.

“Take…… it……”

He lifted the burning heart, holding it out in front of him, repeating: “Take it…… take…… it……”

Droplets of blood fell, only to become so many red haitang blossoms, burning brilliantly as they drifted downwards.

“The road ahead is long and unpredictable. My life ends here, and I can do no more. Please…… please take care…… of…… yourselves……”

Watching this scene unfold before his eyes, Mo Ran suddenly broke out in a cold sweat, feeling like there were thorns digging into his back.

Scar…… this scar!!

He suddenly remembered that, on Chu Wanning’s chest, where the heart was——

There was a scar there!

Chu Wanning was extremely sensitive there, how could he forget? Whenever he licked at that light-colored scar as they entwined in bed, Chu Wanning’s usually impassive face would reveal a hint of the desire that he kept suppressed. That expression made Mo Ran’s blood boil, so he always humiliated the person underneath himself in this way.

But back then, he had never cared about Chu Wanning’s past, and so had never asked how he got that scar, all the way until death.

And now, in this life, he no longer had any right to ask.

Ch.69 This Venerable One Will Learn From You, Yea~

Was it a coincidence? Or...

Presently, his shizun’s chest wasn’t something that he could see whenever he wanted, and he could only rely on his memory to recall that scar. That faint, crescent moon shade, it should’ve been purely the slashing wound from a blade, not like Chu Xun, whose mark was made by that of five fingers piercing with force, and left behind savage, bloody holes.

It wasn’t the same after all.

Mo Ran let out a quiet sigh of relief as he thought this. While Chu Xun and Chu Wanning were completely different people in personality, there were much too many areas of their persons that were alike; from appearance to “As a cultivator, the life of all is our priority, and the self at the bottom”, to that long scar on the chest. With so many coincidences piled together, it really made one suspicious.

Yet for some reason, perhaps it was because Chu Xun was overly gentle, completely different than Chu Wanning’s cruel ruthlessness, or perhaps because Chu Xun was someone married with a son, so if Chu Wanning was Chu Xun’s

reincarnation, or if he was Chu Wanning himself, Mo Ran felt he might not be able to take it, and he'd break down.

Thank goodness it wasn't like that.

There was no need to expand on what kind of disaster would face the City of Ling An without Chu Xun's protection.

Of course the Ghost King wouldn't keep true to his words, and once night entered, the rain was bloody the winds astringent, and the world was flipped upside down. The moat was dyed with the colour of blood, and after the living had lost their senses, their howling and roaring blasted throughout the night.

There were wandering zombies all over the interior of the city, picking and devouring fresh, tender entrails, chomping down on brains.

Mo Ran took Chu Wanning hiding in a broken down little house, the master of which had long since died, and the furnishings and utilities were covered with a layer of heavy dust.

Mo Ran shut the door tightly, securely sealing it all around, leaving only a small window from the kitchen to they could see the situation outside.

And on the outside, there'd come sharp wails and screams from time to time, and the ominous sounds of swallowing and chewing.

Mo Ran picked Chu Wanning up and sat him on a small pile of firewood in the corner, and patted his head, "According to Lady Eighteen, once we defeat the Ghost King we can leave. So you stay here and be good, don't run off anywhere."

Hearing this, Chu Wanning looked up abruptly, "You're going out?"

"Not now. I'll go out once the Ghost King shows himself."

"But it's really dangerous outside. The illusion has already become reality, how can you fight back on your own powers alone?"

"Well I can't bring a kid with me to go fight, can I?"

Chu Wanning shook his head, "I'm coming with you."

"Hahaha, shidi is so cute, but you're still young. If you go out with me you'll drag me down. Wait til you're bigger, and when we run into these things again I won't hold you back from your spotlight. But this time, you have to listen to shixiong."

"I won't drag you down."

"That's what they all say." Mo Ran said, "Just be good, and don't fuss, okay?"

"....."

Seeing that Chu Wanning finally stopped talking, Mo Ran quietly let out a sigh of relief. He turned his gaze through the ribbed wooden window to peer outside, his expression growing serious.

Just why did the illusion that was meant for training suddenly become real? Little shidi was right; someone wanted to harm him. There were countless in his previous life who wanted him dead, but in this life, he hadn't yet offended any powerful character. Thinking back and forth, the only one who might want his life was that fake Gouchen from Jincheng Lake.

But what's the real identity of that fake Gouchen? To be able to run the Zhenlong Chess Formation with such familiarity, how come he never showed his talents in the previous lifetime?

Could it be, that he wasn't the only one reborn in this world...

This thought gave him chills, and his eyes even became sharper and more aggressive.

After rebirth, he only wanted to bury the past, but if there was another who was reborn, then things might become quite difficult.

His brows were knitted deeper and deeper, but suddenly he heard Chu Wanning speak up again, "...Mo Ran, I..."

"What is it?"

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth silently, and after he considered the pros and cons, he steeled his heart and thought he might as well just tell the truth straight.
"Listen to me, in fact, I really can help you. I'm..."

But when Mo Ran heard "I really can help you", he only thought it was little shidi wanting to argue with him again, so he cut him off, "Alright alright, I already said I won't let you out, so I'm not letting you out. Stop trying to be tough. Listen to me."

"No, you listen to me—"

Mo Ran was just feeling vexed, so he replied, "I'm not listening, I'm not listening, la-la-la."

"....."

Seeing Chu Wanning's dark expression, Mo Ran probably felt his attitude just now wasn't very nice, so he used a finger and poked between his brows and laughed, "You little young'un, what's with all this deep tormented suffering, and disobeying of your seniors' words too. Then, let me tell you. Since you call me shixiong and we both came from the same sect, then when we run into perils like these I must protect you at all cost. Do you understand?"

Chu Wanning shut his eyes and answered in a low voice, "...I understand."

"Good to see you do. Then why don't you—"

"But I'm worried about you."

Mo Ran was taken aback, and the finger that hung before Chu Wanning's forehead quivered for a second, and he actually couldn't utter a single word for the moment. He had lived for two lifetimes, but never had he heard anyone say the words "I'm worried about you" to him. Even if Shi Mei treated him with gentleness, he had never expressed his care for him so straightforwardly.

He gazed with amazement at that tiny, small child sitting on top of that pile of firewood before him, and his heart was filled with hundreds of emotions.

After a long while, his eyes gradually grew soft, and the finger he used to poke Chu Wanning lifted, the hand landing on the soft hairs of the other, then he ruffled.

"Don't worry, shixiong promises you. I'll come back alive and well."

"Mo Ran, can you just let me finish..."

Mo Ran grinned, "Alright, what did you want to say?"

"I'm actually—"

PANG! The door was crashed open.

A man with disheveled hair screamed as he charged in, covered in blood, and one of his legs was already ripped into shreds. Behind him was a band of zombies lured in by the stench of blood.

That man tumbled into the room dragging that wretched leg, and grabbed at anything he could get his hands on, hurling the objects to the growling zombies,

and he yelled as he threw, "GET THE HELL OUTTA HERE! DON'T COME OVER HERE! GET AWAY! GET THE HELL AWAY!"

Mo Ran cursed under his breath and blocked Chu Wanning behind him, a red light flashing from his hand, and Jiangui was summoned to shield. He turned half a face over:

"Shidi, hide yourself, absolutely do not come over!"

Then he attacked with the vine in hand, and started to slaughter the mob of corpses that had invaded the house. Although Jiangui and Tianwen were similar, but Chu Wanning hadn't yet fully passed on his moves to Mo Ran, and the weapon Mo Ran wielded in his previous life was a saber, he wasn't used to supple weapons, so while at the beginning of the slaughtering he wasn't losing, gradually it became obvious his power didn't match the heart.

Jiangui was swung all over the place, when suddenly, the voice of a child sounded, crisp and cool, "Left side, wrap around the wrist and strike three times, then jump in the air, swing around the back and sling out."

Mo Ran had no time to think, and followed his guidance to fight. The willow vine whipped upon the body of a zombie on the left, and with just one strike the zombie's arm was broken by the holy weapon, exposing bones. Normally, no one was bored enough to whip twice more, but since little shidi told him to, then he might as well give it a try, no harm done. Thus he immediately struck the zombie again twice, then jumping up, he bent at nimbly at the waist, flipped and slung out the vine whip straight behind his back—

THRASH!

Quite coincidentally, the next wave of corpses just happened to swarm in, and Jiangui that had stored three times the strength blew out a stream of blazing fire, blasting towards them. The band of corpses were instantly slashed by the brutal holy weapon, each of those zombies losing their heads, and when those heads had dropped to the ground they were still smoking with black smoke.

Mo Ran was dumbfounded. He gave a shocked glance at the cool little shidi sitting on top of a pile of firewood.

This guy... he's pretty good?

"How do I move next?" Mo Ran was now energetic, and he asked in excitement.

Chu Wanning instructed expressionlessly, "Next... use your left hand and pat at your right sleeve."

"Ooh, this action is deep and indiscernible, what move is it?"

Chu Wanning said flatly, "Nothing deep and indiscernible. You were swinging too proudly earlier, and the weapon lit a fire on your sleeve, that's all."

Mo Ran "Ah"-ed, and looked down. Sure enough, that was the case, and he hastily patted out the fire Jiangui had started in a mess. This man's face sure was thick; he didn't feel any sense of awkwardness at all, and even looked up with a goofy grin, turning to the other, "My shidi is so amazing. I like."

Chu Wanning softly cleared his throat and silently turned his face away, facing the grey, bare walls, his ears faintly red.

At this time, there were only six zombies left in the house that could still move. Chu Wanning didn't want to look at Mo Ran any longer, so with his head still turned away, he instructed to the wall, "Loosen your wrist, swing the vine towards the sky, twirl it six times to gain power, then slash down like the word 'one'"

Mo Ran followed the instructions, but when he twirled to the fifth round, he suddenly wondered, "How do you slash like the word 'one' [6]?"

"...Just slash how you normally would with a sword."

"Ah, I see!" Mo Ran was enlightened and struck down with one blow. The blazing fires shone, and it was as if that soft and supple vine had suddenly blazed into an indestructible long saber, slashing the six corpses in one swing!

"WAH—"

This time, Mo Ran's eyes were so wide they were practically round.

"Where did you learn this? How come I feel the way you use the vine whip is almost as familiar and practiced as my shizun? No, maybe you're even stronger than him. He had never told me about what you taught me today."

"....."

Mo Ran's smile widened, "Good good good, this is great! Now I don't ever have to take shizun's grim face anymore. I'll just learn from you, ain't that more freeing?"

Chu Wanning shot him a glare, "You scorn Yuheng Elder's grim face? Why don't you scorn my ire?"

Mo Ran withdrew the vine whip and blocked the door shut anew, then he pulled over a table to block the entrance, and laughed, "You giving me a hard time is you being good to me. Us two here, we've technically gotten through hardships together now. Shixiong remembers all the good you've treated shixiong with. From now on I'll dote on you like my own little brother. Nevermind your grim face, even if you beat me up a couple times because you're unhappy I won't get mad."

Chu Wanning's face darkened, "Who wants to be your little brother."

Then he hopped down that pile of firewood, unwilling to mind Mo Ran anymore, and instead when to check on the injuries of that man who had charged in.

Unexpectedly, when he looked, Chu Wanning widened his eyes a little, "...It's him?!"

"Who is it?"

Mo Ran looked over curiously too and was also stunned, "That... that Xiao Man?"

The one lying in a pool of blood and groaning in tears was indeed Xiao Man. He had suffered grave injuries, and after Chu Wanning had checked him over, he shook his head, "Humans and ghosts were never meant to live in harmony. I imagine the Ghost King stopped caring for him once he was done being useful. He really..."

"Deserved it." Mo Ran said.

Chu Wanning gave him a look. Mo Ran haha-ed but suddenly felt a little guilty. If he must say the man deserved the karma of his sins, then wasn't he himself the one who deserved karma the most?

Mo Ran changed the subject and asked, "Oh yea, what was it you wanted to tell me earlier? That you're actually what?"

Chu Wanning lowered his eyelashes, paused, and said softly, "I'm actually—"

Before he could finish, he suddenly felt a breeze behind his back. Chu Wanning jolted viciously, whipped around to fight, but he was in the body of a child after all, his strength far from that of a grown man, and he couldn't struggle free as the other firmly choked his throat!

Somehow, Xiao Man had managed to struggle up from that pool of blood in one breath!

One of his vein popped hands gripped Chu Wanning's neck in a deadly hold, the other twisted and locked Chu Wanning's arms. It was as if a wild flame was burning on that filthy, unkempt face, and the desire to survive had twisted his entire form, changing shapes continuously in the baking heat like a wax figure.

His eyes were bloodshot, and he croaked towards Mo Ran, "Take me... away from here..."

"YOU LET HIM GO!"

"TAKE ME AWAY FROM HERE!" Xiao Man shouted furiously, his eyes practically cracking around the edges from rage, "OTHERWISE I'LL TAKE HIS LIFE! GO!"

"If you want me to save you then I'll save you. What are you doing threatening a child? Let him go first—"

"IF YOU KEEP TALKING I'LL KILL HIM RIGHT NOW!! I've already committed all the sins, I won't care for one more! ARE WE GOING OR NOT!"

Chu Wanning couldn't utter a sound because of the stranglehold, his elegant little face bulging and flustered. Seeing this, Mo Ran was panicking. Although if he struck now he could take Xiao Man's life, but in this illusion turned reality, if Xiao Man really explodes in fury then before he could move to strike, the other might already hurt shidi severely.

"Fine fine fine, I'll listen to you." Mo Ran said, "Don't get riled up, just loosen your hand a bit, I'll immediately..."

Before he finished, blood splattered.

Author's Notes:

Mo Ran: Little Shidi is so good to me! Little Shidi is not only smart but also cute *^o^* Nothing like Shizun at all!

Chu Wanning: Heh, blind.

[1] To shoot through a martial artist with a steel chain through their collarbones was said to be the way to rip them of their abilities and subdue them.

[2] Regional dialect for jiejie

[3] 仙君 xianjun- a respectful form of address for a cultivator

[4] A lock-shaped jewelry worn around the neck like so. It's a tradition where parents take their one month-old child to cultivators or a temple to be given an "entrusted name" so that the child can receive the protection of the gods/buddha and won't die young and will have good fortunes. The lock represents locking the child to life, by the power of the gods/buddha.

[5] 清明 QingMing "Pure Brightness Festival" aka tomb sweeping day, celebration for the dead in early April

[6] The word one is just one line → —

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

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Ch.70 This Venerable One Returns

Chu Wanning wasn't some weakling that just anybody could threaten; there was a flash of golden light—Mo Ran could've sworn he saw some kind of weapon in his hand, but it was gone in less than an instant—and both of Xiao Man's hands had already been sheared clean off, wrists and all!

Xiao Man screamed and stumbled backwards. He only had one useable leg left now that even his hands were gone.

The hand seizing Chu Wanning dropped to the ground. Chu Wanning stood up, enraged, expression dark like never before. His lips moved slightly like he might say something, but in the end he seemed too angry for words and turned away instead, face ashen.

Mo Ran hurriedly rushed over and pulled him into his arms: "Shidi, are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

In his arms, Chu Wanning only shook his head, too disgusted to speak.

For all that, this Xiao Man in front of them was merely an illusion of someone who had once lived two hundred years ago. Chu Wanning wiped the blood splatters from his face and said to Mo Ran in a low voice: "As you saw, staying here wouldn't be any safer for me than going out there with you. I can take care of myself, won't slow you down."

Mo Ran had heard about the little shidi's skill from Xue Meng before, but he had never seen it for himself until just now—it was, admittedly, quite eye-opening.

"Sure you're pretty impressive, but....."

Chu Wanning pushed harder: "I'm also familiar with all kinds of weapons, so I can give you pointers from the side."

"But....."

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes: "Won't you trust in me just this once?"

"....."

"Shixiong."

He had meant to emphasize the sincerity of his words, but with this young, tender voice, it came out all softly adorable instead. Almost like he was acting cute. Chu Wanning was flabbergasted.

Mo Ran blinked, then started rapidly scratching his head in confusion and going "Aaaah" before burying his face in both hands. A long moment passed with his face in his hands before he said: "That, uhm, see I'm just worried that..... you uh....."

Two whole lives and this was the first time a little one had called out this softly to him; Mo Ran really felt so close to him just now, as if they were brothers by blood.

When he hated someone, he hated them to the bone, but to those he cherished, he was extremely tender. And so, when he finished clawing his head and finally looked back up at Chu Wanning from where he was crouched down, the tips of his ears turned red.

If only he really did have a little brother, maybe it wouldn't have been so lonely.

Unfortunately for Mo Ran, his reaction was noticed. Chu Wanning hesitated a little, then tried, experimentally, in a small voice: "Shige."

Shige was an even more familiar form of address than shixiong.

Mo Ran braced his forehead against a hand, seriously at his limit: "....."

Chu Wanning glanced knowingly at Mo Ran and mentally filed away his weak point. Anyway, he was in a child's body right now and Mo Ran hadn't the slightest who he actually was, there was nothing to be embarrassed about, so he opened his mouth again and out came a soft, sticky: "Ge."

"....."

"Gege."

“.....”

“Mo Ran-gege.”

“AAAAAAH!!!!!! OKOK! I'll take you, I'll take you! Stop saying that!” Mo Ran jumped to his feet, face bright red, rubbing the goosebumps on his arms, “Alright, fine, come along then, you win, okay? You win. Oh my god.”

Hands clasped behind his back, Chu Wanning tilted his head and said with a tiny smile: “Let's go then.”

As he walked leisurely toward the door, he could hear Mo Ran mumbling quietly from behind him: “Where in heavens did he learn that from, I nearly died from sugar overdose, holy crap.....”

Chu Wanning was originally in a dreadful state of mind from what happened before with Chu Xun, but now he felt the gloom in his chest slowly lifting. Suddenly, he heard Mo Ran ask: “Oh yeah, what was shidi going to say earlier?”

Chu Wanning turned around and replied evenly: “Ah. That.”

“Hm?”

“I forgot.”

“.....”

“If I remember it later, I'll tell Mo Ran-gege then.....”

“Aaaaaaaah stop! Don't say that one! Shixiong is fine! Shixiong is enough!” Mo Ran waved his hands frantically.

Chu Wanning's eyes were like a pair of deep puddles, the corners of his lips quirked with a hint of a smile: “If you say so, shixiong. Anyway, I think the ghost king will be showing up soon, since this illusion is based on the memories of survivors, and those survivors have left Lin'an by now, so the illusion probably won't last much longer.”

“That makes sense..... we should be able to get out once we defeat him, right? I'm gonna find whoever it was that manifested the illusion and tried to kill us!”

Chu Wanning nodded: “Fortunately for us, judging by the battle with Chu Xun earlier, this ghost king isn't too strong. In fact, he might be the weakest among the nine kings. Although the illusion has been manifested, it seems to me that whoever did it probably thought I was just an ordinary six year old, and didn't expect me to actually be able to help take care of this.”

Mo Ran nodded along: “Sounds about right.”

Chu Wanning continued: “So rather than saying that he tried to kill us, it would be more accurate to say that I was never part of the equation. He's actually only after shixiong.”

Mo Ran nodded even more vigorously: “Checks out.”

“After we get out of here, shixiong must make sure to tell Xue Meng about this. Something is afoot at the Peach Blossom Springs, we have to be careful from here on out. But let's not dwell on that for the time being. Shixiong, please lead the way, I won't slow shixiong down.”

Chu Wanning's prediction was spot on.

Three in the morning; the massacre in the city was winding down.

A bloody rift cracked open in the sky suddenly, green smoke pouring onto the wreckage and solidifying into the shape of a hunched-over man.

The man's eyes were bright scarlet and his skin was ashen pale; half of his body had flesh and skin, but the other half was stark, exposed bone. He stalked across the corpse-littered city with a black banner in tow, absorbing the pain and resentment of the newly deceased as he passed.

Mo Ran looked at the man's face from where they were hidden.
"So it's him?"

There was a hint of relief in his voice.

It was obvious to Chu Wanning why he sounded relieved, but he didn't intend to reveal himself just yet, and a six year old can't know too much.

So he looked up at Mo Ran with feigned cluelessness: "What?"

"You guessed right. The nine kings of the ghost realm differ in strength, and this one is indeed the weakest among them." Mo Ran watched the figure approach from behind a window, saying in a quiet voice, "We lucked out."

"What does shixiong think our odds are?"

"Ninety percent. Always best to not be too overconfident, you know."

Chu Wanning smiled a little.

Of course he knew that the "Skeleton King" was the weakest of the nine ghost kings, but strength was relative. With Mo Ran's age and experience, even with the holy weapon Jiangui at his side, going up against the Skeleton King alone was still pushing it a bit.

Unfortunately for the person plotting against Mo Ran, the kid by his side wasn't just any rookie from Sisheng Peak, but Chu Wanning himself.

"Help me....."

They were just about to burst out the door with a surprise attack when a weak voice called out from behind.

"Ah, he's still alive?" Mo Ran's eyes were wide as he turned to look at Xiao Man curled up in the back.

"I don't want to die.....Dad..... I don't want to....."

Chu Wanning looked at the young man curled into a rumpled heap of rags and shook his head: "Back then, this person had likely died as soon as he stepped in here, but he's still alive in this illusion probably because we happened to be here and killed the undead that were after him, so some things turned out differently."

"*Sigh.....* if he hadn't defected, do you think that maybe Chu Xun wouldn't have died two hundred years ago? That maybe Lin'an wouldn't just be a pile of ruins now....."

"Maybe."

But they both knew that, no matter what they did now, the past was the past. The important thing right now was to defeat the Skeleton King and get out of this illusion, and there was no reason to delay, so they charged out from their hiding place, killing everything in their way.

Getting out of this illusion might be even easier than they had thought.

Mo Ran knew exactly what he had to do, and engaged the Skeleton King without delay. But watching them face off, Chu Wanning felt a wave of

uneasiness.

It wasn't because Mo Ran was struggling; quite to the contrary, under his guidance, Mo Ran maintained a solid upper hand. But more and more, Chu Wanning felt that——

The person behind all this had planned everything out far too precisely.

That is to say, that person had carefully assessed that it would be extremely difficult for just Mo Ran and one other person of average skill to get out of this situation. But he also didn't use anything more deadly than this so as to not rouse any suspicions of foul play. His goal was to make it look like Mo Ran died in a training accident.

Whom exactly was this person, to plan so meticulously against Mo Ran's life?

Was it really that fake Gouchen from Jincheng Lake.....

Chu Wanning watched the ferocious battle between Mo Ran and the Ghost King. The longer it went on, the more Mo Ran came out on top, and as the sky slowly lightened, the Ghost King's strength gradually waned; victory was all but in hand.

But just then, amongst that horde of undead and demons sealed behind Mo Ran's spell, Chu Wanning suddenly saw the face of a living person!

"Who is it!!!!"

Amidst the walking corpses, half of that person's face was shadowed beneath the hood of his cloak. From this distance, all he could see was a sharp chin, sweetly colored lips, and a gently curved nose.

Just one look, and Chu Wanning could tell that this person didn't belong in the illusion of two hundred years past—he wasn't in any kind of fighting stance, only shrouded under his hood, looking in Chu Wanning and Mo Ran's direction. Seeing that Chu Wanning had noticed him, he smiled faintly then lifted a hand and swept it across his neck in a "kill" gesture.

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath and lunged to try and capture him.

But that person only kept smiling, crimson lips and ivory teeth under his hood, and mouthed what looked like "goodbye".

Then he turned and disappeared.

"Stay right there!"

It was useless. The sky brightened, layers of fish scale clouds painting across it.

The fight between Mo Ran and the Ghost King ended with one final blow—the very moment that Jiangui sheared the Ghost King's head clean off, sending foul blood flying everywhere, their bodies were abruptly tossed up, and that sunrise of ancient Lin'an from two hundred years ago, the ruined wreckage of the city, all of it sped away in a blur.

Thump!

When Chu Wanning hit the ground again, he found himself back at the testing cave.

Mo Ran was also here, dropped on the ground next to him, covered in blood from the fight, but mostly not his own. He was laid out on the ground, clearly still too tired to get up, only gazing at Chu Wanning with those pitch-black eyes.

A few moments passed, then he lifted a hand and gently poked Chu Wanning's forehead.

"We made it."

Chu Wanning "Mn"-ed, but his expression was dark: ".....I saw someone in there just now."

"What?"

"It was probably the spell caster."

Mo Ran rolled up, his eyes going wide: "You saw him? You saw him! Did you see who it was? What did he look like?"

Chu Wanning shook his head, brows furrowed: "He was wearing a hood, I couldn't see clearly. But based on the figure, he should be male, fairly young, thin, with a pointed chin....."

But he didn't voice the rest of his thoughts.

He felt like this half of a face looked vaguely familiar, as if he had seen this person somewhere before, long ago. But he also couldn't shake the feeling that he might be mistaken, it was only half of a face after all, and there were plenty of similar-looking people out there, so he couldn't really be sure.

He was deep in thought when he felt Mo Ran pat him on the shoulder.

"Shidi."

"What is it?"

".....Look over there."

Mo Ran's voice was low, with a chill in it.

Chu Wanning looked up in the direction he was pointing.

It was Eighteen.

At the entrance to the testing cave, Eighteen hung from the ceiling, both eyes bulging outwards, the embroidered satin shoes on her feet swaying in mid air.

She was already dead, and there was no wind here. Judging by the angle of her body's sway, the murderer had just left.

But the thing that turned their faces pale was the murder weapon wrapped tightly around her neck.

It was a willow vine.

With sharp, blade-like leaves, the vine coursed with a firey red light that crackled, erupting with sparks that fell together with the drops of blood.

Jiangui.

The thing that strangled Eighteen and hung her from the roof of the cave was none other than the holy weapon Jiangui!

Author's Notes:

Disguise: Eh? Didn't you want to take me off in the last chapter? I'll take it off for you now...

Chu Wanning: The opportunity has passed, you can be good and stay on me. (Apathetic expression)

Ch.71 This Venerable One's Been Framed

Face ashen, Mo Ran was in utter disbelief as he summoned the weapon that he had just put away a moment ago. Jiangui answered his call, appearing in his hand in a blaze of firey light.

Comparing the two, the weapon that killed Eighteen was practically identical to Jiangui, almost like a piece of it, save for the fact that it had no hilt—could it be that there was a second Jiangui in this world?!

But before he could think on it, urgent footsteps approached at a rapid speed. Chu Wanning was more level-headed than Mo Ran; he quickly assessed the situation and a chill flickered through his eyes: "Mo Ran, put Jiangui away!" "Wha——?"

Too late.

A group of people had already arrived at the entrance to the cave. There were people from the feathered tribe, cultivators from the various sects, even Xue Meng, Ye Wangxi, and Shi Mei were there..... it was as if someone had noticed that something strange was happening here and called just about everyone over in a hurry.

And so, when everyone arrived one after the other, the sight that greeted them was that of Eighteen, brutally murdered, the willow vine cutting into her neck; and behind her, Mo Ran and a small child, battered from clearly having just fought a fierce battle, Mo Ran covered in blood and holding Jiangui in hand, the willow vine coursing with a menacing, firey light.....

No one made a sound.

Until someone suddenly yelled: "M-murderer!"

The crowd began to clamor; panic, anger, and whispered words surging into a river, the drone of voices shaking the very bones. "She's dead" "Murderer" "How vicious" "Must be insane" "Lunatic" fragments of words were repeated over and over, the frenzied mob looking no different from the walking corpses in the illusion just now, and for a moment, Mo Ran almost thought that the illusion was not yet over, that the nightmare still continued.

Almost as if the blood spilt in Lin'an two hundred years ago still covered the ground.

"No....." He took a step backward, throat dry, "It wasn't me....."

He felt a tug on his clothes, and his step paused.

Amidst the madness, he looked down and saw Chu Wanning's clear eyes.

He murmured helplessly: "It wasn't me....."

Chu Wanning nodded and tried to shield him behind himself. But he was only a small child right now, what could he do?

As he fretted, he felt Mo Ran step forward.

More and more people joined in on the shouting: "Lock him up! The kid too! Grab them! Murderers!"

"We can't let them get away, they're too dangerous! Hurry and grab them!"

Mo Ran pulled Chu Wanning behind himself, blocking him from sight, then took a moment to breathe and collect himself.

"I didn't kill Miss Eighteen. Please let me explain."

The faces in the crowd looked blurry, overlapping with a memory from the past life that he couldn't bear to remember. He strained to see Xue Meng amongst the shadows in the crowd, his face filled with disbelief, and then he saw Shi Mei, eyes wide and face pale, his head shaking repeatedly.

Mo Ran closed his eyes and spoke in a low voice: "I didn't kill her, but I don't plan to run away either. At least hear me out before you lock me up?"

But even so, no one wanted to listen to him. Anger and anxiety spread through the crowd; a high-pitched female voice yelled: "Y-you got caught red-handed, what even is there to say!"

"That's right!"

"Just toss them in lockup first! If it turns out they didn't do it, we can just let them out then!"

"Lock them up! Lock them up!"

Xue Meng snapped out of his shocked state. He stepped out from the crowd and stood in front of those angry, twisted faces with his back to Mo Ran, and raised his voice: "Everyone please calm down, I have something to say."

"Who the hell are you!"

"Why would we listen to you!"

"Wait, isn't that the little phoenix?"

"Little phoenix? You mean the darling of the heavens? That Xue Meng?"

"That's him....."

Xue Meng's expression was terrible, nearly colorless. He took a deep breath and said, slowly: "Everyone, please listen. Both of them are disciples of Sisheng Peak, and I can vouch that they absolutely wouldn't do something like murder an innocent person. So please calm down and let them explain first."

"....."

A moment of silence, then someone yelled: "And why should we believe you? So what if they're Sisheng Peak disciples, that doesn't mean you know their true nature!"

"Exactly! There's no knowing what someone's really like, even if you're from the same sect!"

Xue Meng's expression grew even darker, lips pressed in a thin line as his hands clenched into fists.

Behind him, Mo Ran stood with Chu Wanning in tow. Truth be told, he was surprised when Xue Meng came out in their defense. He hadn't exactly been close with this cousin of his in the past life, or rather, they could hardly even stand one another. And later, when he became the emperor of the human realm and burned, killed, and plundered as he liked, the two of them had naturally ended up on opposite sides of the battle.

So he never expected that Xue Meng would stand with his back to him, facing the horde and all of their pointed fingers.

Mo Ran felt warmth flood his heart: "Xue Meng, you..... believe me?"

"Ungh! Yeah right, you damn mutt!" Xue Meng's face turned slightly toward him as he huffed, "Look at this mess you got into! Aren't you the older one, why do I gotta clean up after you!"

"....."

But after he got done cursing out Mo Ran, he whipped back around and started yelling at those people in an even more fierce tone: "What? How would I

not know them? One of them is my shidi, and the other is my cousin! Who knows them better, me, or the lot of you?"

"Xue Meng....."

"Would it kill you guys to listen to a bit of explanation? With all these people here, it's not like they're gonna grow wings and fly off if you just give them a couple of minutes!"

At this time, Shi Mei also stepped out, but his mannerisms were far too soft to be imposing, and there was fright in his voice as he said: "Everyone, I can also vouch for them, they definitely wouldn't have hurt Miss Eighteen, so please hear them out, thank you....."

Even Ye Wangxi stepped forward. Although he didn't vouch for them, he was much calmer than the rest of the agitated crowd.

He said: "Even if it's a temporary detainment, they should still at least get the chance to explain and defend themselves. Otherwise, we might be letting the real killer off the hook. What if that person is amongst us as we speak, what then?"

At his words, the people in the crowd immediately started looking at one another with alarm in their eyes.

".....Fine! We'll hear you out first!"

"But we're still going to lock you up! Can't be too cautious, after all!"

"Guilty until proven innocent!"

Mo Ran let out a breath and folded his hands against his forehead^[1], and then, after a moment, actually smiled.

"I never would have thought that, surrounded on all sides, there would still be people willing to believe in me. Okay, okay, even if I get locked up, just for you three, I won't be mad about it."

He simply and briefly went over what had happened, from the manifestation of the illusion and the events that had transpired within, to finding Eighteen murdered upon exiting the illusion.

Unfortunately, once a Domain of Fiends scenario has been overcome, a brand new illusion is created for the next person to enter, so there was no way to check if Mo Ran was telling the truth or not. But it did seem like a stretch for him to have come up with such an elaborate story in such little time if he was making it up.

So by the time he finished, more than half the people in the crowd already seemed to be wavering.

A higher up of the feathered tribe spoke quietly to her subordinate, then said: "Mo Ran, Xia Sini, although the two of you have presented explanations, you have no evidence. For the safety of the Peach Blossom Springs, we will have to detain you until the matter has been resolved."

Mo Ran smiled helplessly: "Alright alright, I figured as much anyway. I won't complain too much as long as you feed me."

"That's a matter of course." She paused before continuing: "Henceforth, everyone please be on your guard to prevent any further accidents. All who did not arrive here in time will be questioned one by one to eliminate any suspicions. Furthermore, I will be informing the leaders of each sect, especially Sisheng Peak, which is most heavily involved. If possible, I would like to invite your Shizun here for a chat."

"Shizun?!" Mo Ran's expression changed immediately.
Chu Wanning stood quietly without a word.
"I don't want Shizun to come! Will my uncle do?"
"Issues involving the disciple shall be reported to the master. This has always been the rule in the cultivation world, is it different at Sisheng Peak?"
"No, but....."

Mo Ran scratched his head in frustration, letting out one sigh after another, but didn't know what to say.

Issues involving the disciple shall be reported to the master, of course that made sense.

But even just thinking about Chu Wanning's indifferent face and those crisp, cold eyes, and Mo Ran was already certain that if he were to come, he'd definitely just give him a dressing-down first and foremost regardless of right or wrong. He'd rather not see him at all.

But no matter what he said, there was nothing he could do.
Both he and his little shidi got locked up.

The lockup at the Peach Blossom Springs was a cave, not very big but also not too small, its entrance covered by ancient brambles that only listened to the commands of the feathered tribe. The inside never saw the light of day, but thankfully there was a firepit with enchanted flames that burned continuously.

The furnishings inside were simple: a wide, plain bed of stone padded with golden-red cushions made of woven feathers, a stone table and four stone stools, one copper mirror, and a couple sets of bowls and cups.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were imprisoned here together.

Although judgement had yet to be passed, the one in charge of them seemed to be have been close with Eighteen. Eighteen lost her life for no reasons at all, so the feathered tribe guard took it out on them by making their lives more difficult.

On the first night, the guard still knew to deliver some food; it wasn't great or much, but there was enough to eat. However, by the second day, there were only some raw meat, vegetables, rice, flour, and salt tossed casually into the cave along with something about not having the time to take care of their meals and to sort it out themselves.

"Fine, we'll sort it out ourselves then. It's just cooking, what's so hard about that?"

Mo Ran muttered huffily from where he was crouched on the ground, picking out the useable ingredients.

"What does shidi want to eat?"

".....Whatever."

"Sigh, there's no dish more difficult to cook than the one called 'Whatever'. Let's see here, we have pork belly, napa cabbage..... tsk, this bird sure is stingy, it's only the outer layers of the cabbage. There's quite a bit of rice and flour, but not sure how many days this is supposed to last us for." He muttered while counting the ingredients, then looked up at Chu Wanning, "Do you want rice or noodles?"

Chu Wanning was resting on the bed, tummy-down. He thought about it, then said: "Noodles."

A pause, then he added: "Soup noodle with spare ribs."

".....Ahaha, where am I gonna get spare ribs from?"

"Then whatever's fine."

Mo Ran sat cross-legged on the ground, one hand on his knee, cheek squished against the other, and thought for a bit before saying: "There's not many ingredients here, how about noodles with minced meat?"

"Noodles with minced meat?"

"Would you like that?"

"Sure. Is it spicy?"

Mo Ran grinned: "There isn't even a shadow of a pepper in what that bird gave us."

With dinner decided, Mo Ran set about kneading the dough. Chu Wanning was short and not that strong, so he didn't even bother trying to make a pretense of helping. He watched Mo Ran knead that soft, white ball of dough from where he lay in bed, gaze growing softer.

He suddenly felt that this wasn't bad after all—Mo Ran didn't know who he was, so he could stay by his side just like this, and when Mo Ran cooked, he'd bother to ask what he wanted to eat. It really wasn't bad.

He even felt a little uneasy, as if he had been given too much, as if he had stolen it all from a child named "Xia Sini".

Mo Ran finished cooking the noodles and put the stir-fried mincemeat on top. They had pitifully few seasonings, so he couldn't really make anything fancy, but the noodles were pulled to a chewy consistency at just the right softness, and he had cut off the fatty part of the pork to fry the meat in. The mince sizzled as it was poured over the noodles; it'll be delicious mixed in.

"Shidi, dinner's....." He looked up to find that Chu Wanning had fallen asleep, still lying tummy-down like before, face turned to the side with his head pillowied on his arms, long eyelashes resting against his cheeks, expression peaceful.

"Ready....." He finished in a mumble, then walked over to the bed and stroked Chu Wanning's smooth, inky hair.

"Looking at you like this, you really do look like Shizun. I wonder what the relationship is between you, Shizun, and the Chu family of Lin'an, and also, just who exactly is after us. *Sigh.....* wonder what Shizun's up to right now, if he knew what had happened here, would he blame me again regardless of all else?"

At that, the color in Mo Ran's eyes darkened a little as he played with a strand of Chu Wanning's hair around his finger, sighing faintly.

"You don't know him, but anytime anything happens, he always gives me hell..... he really doesn't like me at all."

But Chu Wanning was asleep, and these words scattered weightlessly into the silence of night without an answer, just like the misunderstandings coiled around them for decades and decades across two lifetimes.

Mo Ran waited for the noodles to cool down a bit before waking Chu Wanning up.

"Shidi, dinner's ready."

Chu Wanning covered a yawn and blinked blearily.
"Oh, dinner....."

Mo Ran carried the noodles over. He liked to cook, but hated doing the dishes, so just for the sake of having one less dish to wash, he had put the noodles directly into the pot he fried the mincemeat in.

Chu Wanning was flabbergasted at this unorthodox and uncultured way of eating, his eyes wide as he stared disbelievingly at the big pot of noodles: "How.....are we supposed to eat this?"

"Together of course." Mo Ran handed him a pair of chopsticks and was already putting his hands together with a grin, "The race to see who can scoop out more noodles is just about to begin! Who's gonna get to eat more? We're about to find out."

"....."

Mo Ran laughed gleefully, his eyes curved into little crescents. Chu Wanning stared at him a little: "It's almost like, as long as you have food, you're very....."

"Very happy right?"

"Mn."

"Haha, food is the most important thing, after all!"

Mo Ran said, then cheekily scooped up a big clump of noodles for himself, slurping it all up until his cheeks were puffed out: "It doesn't look great, but it's pretty tasty."

"....." Chu Wanning's expression was dark, "Don't slurp while eating."

"Hahahaha!" Mo Ran laughed, slapping his leg, "How is a little kid like you this much like my Shizun? He also told me to not slurp, but you know what? Once, when I was eating with him, I purposefully threw a bone in his bowl, and he got so mad! Hahahahaha——"

Chu Wanning grit his teeth: "Impudent!"

"Yeah yeah yeah! That reaction exactly, how did you know? Even the delivery was just like him! Hey Shidi, seriously, I think you two might be distant relatives, why don't you ask Shizun about it when he gets here? O-oi——wait not the egg the egg's mine——"

Author's Notes:

Weiyu-er 猫: Does Shididi want to eat rice or noodles?

Big white kitty: It's gotten cold, why not eat dog meat? (sneer)

Ch.72 This Venerable One Stews Soup

At night, the two of them lay on the wide stone bed. Trying to pass the time while locked up was a task in and of itself—they had already trained and eaten, and now there was nothing else to do.

Chu Wanning, calm and tranquil by nature, wasn't all that bothered, but Mo Ran paced this way and that in the constricted space of the cave, and time only seemed to crawl even slower.

"Ahh I'm so bored, so bored, what to do? What to do?"

Chu Wanning, with his eyes closed: "Sleep."

"But it's still so early." Mo Ran glanced at the hourglass and shook his head, "Way too early."

Chu Wanning ignored him.

Mo Ran rolled about on the bed, then suddenly scooted over and pulled his cheek.

"Shidi."

"....."

"Shidi~"

"....."

"SHIDI!!!!"

Chu Wanning's eyes flew open angrily: "What do you want!"

Mo Ran took his hands in his own and swung their joined hands back and forth shamelessly: "Play with me."

".....Am I the shidi here, or you?" Chu Wanning wrenched his hands back, beyond irate, "Who's gonna fool around with you!"

Mo Ran smiled sweetly, truly and completely shameless: "You of course. Who else is there?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

Mo Ran took off the narrow red cord holding his hair up, tied the ends together, and wove it around his fingers into a distinct pattern.

Despite his protests, Chu Wanning sat up after all, asking grumpily: "What is this? How do you play it?"

"It's called cat's cradle. Mostly girls play it, not so much boys, but I grew up in an entertainment house full of girls, so I ended up learning it too."

"....."

"It's pretty fun actually, see, hook your finger around this string here..... no not that finger, use your pinky, yeah, like that. Then take your thumb and forefinger and hook around these two strings here....." Mo Ran instructed slowly and patiently.

The candle flame crackled, casting its warm light on them, one big and one small, their heads lowered in concentration as they passed that loop of red string made from a hair tie back and forth, both their expressions slowly softening.

Chu Wanning held segments of the string taut between his fingers as he followed Mo Ran's instructions to weave a new pattern, but accidentally missed a string, so rather than turning into the new pattern when it exchanged hands, the red string returned instead to its original shape of being just a simple loop.

He stared at it blankly, hands still held in mid air, face full of incomprehension as he muttered: "Why did it fall apart? What happened....."

"Haha, you probably just missed a string again."

".....Again."

"No more, no more." Mo Ran laughed, "The same thing over and over gets boring, let's do something else."

"No." Now it was Chu Wanning's turn to be displeased, "One more time."

"....."

They spent three days in the cave. Their fourth night there, and Mo Ran was busy making preparations to cook something delicious for Chu Wanning as

usual. He had figured some things out during these last few days together; his little shidi truly was from the same place as Shizun, they even had the same exact tastes in food.

Tonight's delivery from the feathered tribe guard was a hen and a couple of mushrooms. Mo Ran planned to make chicken soup with mushrooms, then add in some of his handmade noodles, and it shouldn't taste too bad.

"Are we having chicken soup tonight?"

"Mhm." Mo Ran answered, glancing to the side at Chu Wanning. The kid was a genius in the martial arts, yet simply couldn't get a grasp on cat's cradle. But he was also stubborn to a fault and would play around with a hair cord trying to figure it out every chance he got. Mo Ran couldn't help smiling at that mulish look of his.

Mo Ran said with a smile: "Feel free to play with it while I cook, but I'm afraid the soup's gonna finish stewing before you work it out."

Chu Wanning let out a cold hmpf, and paused before saying: "Is there any ginger left?"

"Let me see..... yep, there's plenty, they gave us a bunch yesterday."

Chu Wanning sounded satisfied: "Put some in, it gets rid of the raw meat smell."

Mo Ran stroked his chin: "Oh..... and lemme guess, add some wolfberries too?"

Chu Wanning's eyes brightened: "Do we have some?"

"Pfft. Of course not, I was just thinking that your tastes really are just like Shizun's. He also likes ginger and wolfberries in his soup."

"..... You remember what he likes to eat?"

"Haha, yup yup, I'm super clever." Mo Ran didn't feel like explaining, and it's not like he could talk about things like past lives with his little shidi anyway, so he rolled with it, "I'm a perfect model of a filial disciple following the standard of the Twenty Four Filial Exemplars, don't you know? It's just too bad that Shizun doesn't see my heartfelt sincerity."

Mo Ran began cleaning the chicken as he talked absently, and thus completely missed Chu Wanning's expression. He plucked it and removed the innards with a quick, practiced hand, and was just about to boil the blood out when he heard little shidi say in a quiet voice: "He isn't necessarily unaware."

"Wha?"

Seeing Mo Ran look up, the tips of Chu Wanning's ears turned red. He turned away and cleared his throat: "I said, Yuheng Elder isn't necessarily unaware that you're good to him."

"Oh, that. It doesn't really matter, I'm already used to it anyway. Even though I did wish, once, that he would be like other people's masters and ask after me sometimes, or that he'd occasionally know what I liked like how I know what he likes to eat. But that's all in the past now. When I first entered the sect, I was fooled by his pretty looks and thought he was a gentle person. Thinking back on it now is really..... sigh, my esteemed Shizun is so illustrious and unapproachable, and busy on top too, how could I possibly dare to hope for his attention? Haha, ahahaha."

Chu Wanning was a little angry at his words at first, but then he thought about it, and although he was concerned about Mo Ran in their daily life, he did indeed always maintain a veneer of aloofness and distance; he hung his head wordlessly, anger turned into consternation instead. After a while, he hopped off the bed and walked quietly over to Mo Ran.

“What’s up?”

“You’re always the one cooking. Today’s is simple, so I’ll cook for you instead.”

Mo Ran blinked, then smiled: “Where’d this come from? You’re too short to even reach the stove, how are you gonna cook? Besides, I’m your shixiong, since you’ve called me that, the least I can do is feed you.”

Chu Wanning carried a stool over and climbed onto it, then stared at him stubbornly without a word.

Mo Ran: “.....Why are you glaring at me?”

“I can reach the stove just fine.”

“.....”

“Yuheng Elder may not know what you like to eat, but I’m not heartless like him.” Chu Wanning said expressionlessly, “Go take a break, I’ll cook.”

And so Chu Wanning busied himself with dinner preparations, refusing to let Mo Ran help at all. There was an aura of menace and a concentrated ferocity in his eyes as he lifted the kitchen knife high into the air and brought it stiffly down on the poor chicken. Mo Ran almost couldn’t bear to look.

Mo Ran tried to help, but even the little shidi’s temper was just like Shizun, and hated getting interrupted when he was concentrating on something. So in the end, Mo Ran could only scratch his head and wander off to go plop into bed.

Having finally put the chicken into the pot, Chu Wanning covered it with a clay lid and was just about to turn and say something to Mo Ran when he heard a quiet voice from the cave entrance.

“A-Ran, Xia-shidi, are you there?”

As soon as he heard this voice, Mo Ran immediately jumped off the bed as if struck by lightning and dashed to the entrance. Through a gap between the brambles, the first person he saw was someone from the feathered tribe standing there coldly, but then he looked around and found Shi Mei behind her, dressed in his usual whites and face full of worry. Mo Ran was ecstatic: “Shi Mei! What..... what are you doing here?”

“I have something important to tell you.” Shi Mei said, “Sect Leader received the report and rushed over to the Peach Blossom Springs at once, he’s making negotiations with the feathered tribe as we speak. How have you been, are you being treated okay?”

“I’m great, eating well drinking well and jumping around too.” Mo Ran paused, then asked, “What about Shizun? Where is he?”

“I heard he’s still in seclusion and didn’t come.”

“Oh.....” Something flickered past Mo Ran’s eyes, then he sighed and mumbled to himself, “It’s fine if he didn’t come..... it’s fine.”

"But Xuanji Elder came to vouch for Xia-shidi." Shi Mei asked, "Is Xia-shidi already asleep?"

Mo Ran: "No he's making soup. Shidi——come over here!"

Chu Wanning put down the little bamboo fan he was using to fan the flames and walked over to the entrance. He looked at the two people outside, expression not the least bit surprised, and said flatly: "What is it?"

Shi Mei didn't even get a chance to speak before that feathered tribe person hmph'd and shot back: "What else could it be? People from your Sisheng Peak came. Your master says he'll vouch for you, and is meeting with our Great Immortal Lord right now."

".....My master?"

"Xuanji Elder."

"Oh." Chu Wanning paused, face totally expressionless, "Good."

The corner of the feathered tribe person's mouth twitched: "You two can come out. Everyone is already gathered at the Dewsip Pavilion waiting to hear your explanations."

Chu Wanning turned to look at the chicken soup on the stove and said: "I'll pass. The soup isn't done cooking yet, I have to keep an eye on it. Mo Ran, you can speak for me."

Hearing his words, the feathered tribe person thought him to be an immature, unreasonable child and smiled coldly, trying to scare him: "You'll miss your chance to defend yourself if you don't go. And if you get judged to be the murderer, there goes your head."

But Chu Wanning wasn't even concerned, a face of indifference as he shot her a cold glance and turned to leave.

Shi Mei was about to call out after him, but Mo Ran shook his head with a smile: "Let him be, I'll go."

"But Xuanji Elder came all this way, it would be rude to not greet him....."

Before Mo Ran could say anything, Chu Wanning's voice came from afar: "Mo-shixiong, please send shizun my regards."

"....." Shi Mei had said it so quietly but it still got heard; feeling a little awkward, he cleared his throat and waited for the feathered tribe person to open the brambles covering the cave entrance, then immediately grabbed Mo Ran to leave.

Unexpectedly, Chu Wanning turned around just then and called: "Shixiong."

"Did Shidi change his mind and want to come along after all?" Mo Ran smiled.

Chu Wanning's little hand waved in his sleeve: "Of course not. I just wanted to remind you to come back soon, or the soup will go cold."

Mo Ran blinked and then laughed helplessly: "Alright, wait for me."

"Mn." Chu Wanning said nothing else, watching Mo Ran walk away and disappear behind a corner before turning back around to attend to the soup.

The Dewsip Pavilion wasn't far from the lockup cave. On the way there, Shi Mei asked offhandedly: "A-Ran, you seem to have grown even closer with Xia-shidi these days?"

Mo Ran smiled: "Yeah, we went through a lot together. What, is Shi Mei jealous of a little kid?"

".....Nonsense."

"Hahaha, no need to worry, my favorite person is and will always be Shi Mei."

".....Stop talking nonsense, I just feel like Xia-shidi is a little odd....."

"Odd? Oh....." Mo Ran thought for a bit, then nodded, "I guess he is pretty odd."

"You think so too?"

"Yup." Mo Ran grinned, "He's such a little thing but talks just like an adult, and his magicks are no joking matter either. Oh and, I haven't gotten a chance to tell you guys yet, but the stuff that happened in the illusion was even more bizarre. I think he might be a distant relative of our Shizun, you know."

Shi Mei's eyes shifted slightly, and he asked: "Why do you say that?"

"We saw someone in the illusion, the son of the Lin'an governor from two hundred years ago. His surname was also Chu, and looked just like Shizun, and his son also looked....."

Just when he was getting to the important part, a sudden burst of loud cursing came from the front. He looked up just in time to see Xue Meng striding over with a thundercloud on his face, still cursing without stop: "Bastard! BEAST! SHAMELESS MUTT!"

Author's Notes:

Weiyu-er 🎃: Why hasn't Shizun's identity been revealed up till now? I want to let Shizun return to his adult form.

Meatbun: If he goes back to his adult form, can I still develop the plot properly? I locked you and him into a small, dark room; thankfully, he's still in the form of a little boy, otherwise, wouldn't I have to cook a fucking 10000-word meal [smut]? With this sort of performance, you still want to have sex? Dream on, trash.

Ch.73 This Venerable One is Confused

Having run into Mo Ran so suddenly, Xue Meng blinked. This was the first time the two had come face to face since Mo Ran was detained.

Recalling how Xue Meng defended him in front of the others, Mo Ran smiled at him in spite of himself, but Xue Meng was thoroughly shocked by this grin, and looked disgusted, his words contemptuous, "What are you doing? What are you looking at? What are you smiling about? What's there to smile about!"

"...I'm greeting you."

"Disgusting!"

Mo Ran: “.....”

A comeback like that killed Mo Ran’s conversation starter, and Shi Mei hummed pensively for a moment but didn’t push for any more answers either, and only smiled at Xue Meng, “Young Master, who annoyed you now?”

“Who else can it be? WHO ELSE CAN IT BE!! Shameless! Disgusting! Despicable! Obscene!”

Mo Ran sighed, “That doesn’t rhyme.”

“WHO CARES! WHY DON’T YOU GO AT IT IF YOU’RE SO GREAT!”

“I’m not great, I’m uncultured.” Mo Ran chuckled, “Come on, tell us. Who pissed you off?”

Shi Mei said with a smile: “I bet it was dashixiong again.”

“Goddamn dashixiong! BEAST! PERVERT! If he’s so easy, how come he hasn’t gotten syphilis?! I’m freakin’ willing to give ten years of my life so that he’d get sores on his head, ooze pus from his feet, rotten nose and rotten eyes, let’s see who’d like him then, that despicable, shameless, obscene...”

Mo Ran: “.....”

Seeing that Xue Meng was going to sink into an endless cycle, Shi Mei hastily stopped him, pointing behind and exclaimed, “Shh, look, the beloved dashixiong and those lady cultivators have come——”

“!!!” Xue Meng jumped, and that always proud face suddenly flashed a trace of trepidation. He cursed “filthy debauched” under his breath but actually turned around and left with his tail between his legs without looking back, truly panicking like that of a beaten dog. In the end however, he still wanted face and shouted back, “I suddenly remembered I’ve got something to do, so I’m heading off first!”

Mo Ran watched him scamper off out of sight and was amazed, “Wow, this dashixiong really has it going on! Actually scaring him off like this.”

Shi Mei held back his laugh, “Ever since he ran into him the other day at the restaurant and got into a scuffle, he’s been like this since he got back. I guess he’s met his match.”

“Amazing, amazing. I’ve gotta see him for myself sometimes.” While those were the words that left his lips, but inwardly Mo Ran had already gotten some ideas. If that man could make Xue Meng hide like this, then this “dashixiong” should no doubt be the one he’s thinking of.

But now wasn’t the time to enjoy Xue Meng’s spectacle. Xue Zhengyong and Xuanji had already arrived at the Dewsip Pavilion, and were just softly discussing Eighteen’s murder case with the master of the Peach Blossom Springs, the Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe.

The Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe was practically divine; the glow of spiritual light circled and enveloped her body, and while she looked to be a young woman of a fair, tender age, heavens knew how old she actually was.

She was just explaining the case calmly to Xue Zhengyong when a personal attendant walked in and reported in a low voice, “Elder Immortal, we’ve brought them.”

“Send them in.”

Mo Ran and Shi Mei entered the warm pavilion, scanned around, and saw Xue Zhengyong was fanning that infamous fan, speaking to others, and they immediately called out, "Uncle!"

"My child, my child." Xue Zhengyong heard them and looked around. His eyes lit up, and quickly beckoned them over, then patted his shoulder, "Come, sit next to uncle..."

"I didn't kill her..."

"Of course it wasn't you, of course it wasn't." Xue Zhengyong sighed incessantly, "Who knows how this misunderstanding came about. The Elder Immortal told me everything just now, and my coming here this time was to help prove your innocence. Sigh, heavens have mercy, look how downtrodden you look."

He pulled Mo Ran over, and the Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe didn't stop him either, and only watched the two with passive eyes.

Mo Ran also greeted the Xuanji Elder too, and immediately sat down next to Xue Zhengyong's side. However, what made Mo Ran wonder was Xuanji didn't immediately notice his disciple Xia Sini wasn't around, and only very naturally nodded at Mo Ran.

It was actually the Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe who asked, "Eh? Where's the other child? The one named Xia."

"Ah, yea." Only then did Xuanji come around, "...Where's my disciple?"

Mo Ran saw that he obviously didn't care for Xia Sini and felt somewhat upset, "My shidi is still locked up. He asked me to greet you on his behalf."

"Is that so." Xuanji nodded, "Why he didn't come?"

Mo Ran replied curtly, "He's cooking."

"....."

Xue Zhengyong was bewildered for a moment, then laughed, "Is cooking more important than clearing his name?"

Xuanji also grinned, "Playing around so capriciously. I'll go check on him once the meeting is over."

"No need. After the meeting we still gotta eat." Mo Ran said, "Interrogate however you will, but let's get this over and done with."

Thus, Xue Zhengyong spoke up, "Elder Immortal, let's continue what we were discussing earlier. How about this: We have an elder in our sect who is skilled in refining pills. Before coming here, I asked him to refine a number of truth pills."

"Truth pills?" The Elder Immortal was slightly taken aback after hearing him, and lightly tapped the corner of her lips with a dainty, crimson finger, "Is it that pill that could make mortals speak the absolute truth?"

"That's correct."

The Elder Immortal was rather surprised, "The materials required for this pill is complicated and difficult to refine, and even here in our Peach Blossom Springs, it'd take at least half a month to produce such a pill. I'm amazed that my lord has such a medical expert, why didn't you bring him along?"

"He's asocial by nature, and dislikes traveling with others." Xue Zhengyong replied, "The pills are already being refined, and they could be sent to the Peach Blossom Springs by pigeon post within ten days. When that time comes, pray my Elder Immortal come to testify the effectiveness of the pills, and have the young disciples take them. The truths will be revealed then."

"....." The Elder Immortal contemplated for a moment, then inclined her head, "That is feasible."

Xue Zhengyong sighed a breath of relief and smiled, "Then if that's the case, let me go this instant to bring my other disciple out of the prison cave."

"Hold it."

"What is it?"

"Before this affair is cleared, both Mo Ran and Xia Sini are still suspicious." The Elder Immortal said, "Even with the Sect Leader's insurance, this venerable cannot allow freedom to the two of them."

When Xue Zhengyong heard this, he shut the fan with a clear PA! While there was still a smile on his face, his eyes had grown colder, "Now, that's a little disingenuous, Elder Immortal."

The Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe raised her gaze, and stared at him with a pair of scarlet red eyes, "Is Xue-zunzhu dissatisfied with our decision?"

"Of course. Since a guilty verdict hasn't been passed on the two disciples of my sect, then with my and Xuanji Elder's watch and guarantee, what reason is there for Elder Immortal to keep them detained so intently?"

"It's not really detention." The Elder Immortal said coolly, "I've never mistreated them, and their daily meals are uninterrupted. I've only restricted their movements, it's not unreasonable."

Xue Zhengyong was still smiling, but the smile had gone cold.

"Not unreasonable? In my understanding, that Prison cave saw neither the sun nor the moon, a place to imprison criminals who are clearly sentenced as guilty. How incredible that with but a smack of lips, Elder Immortal determined it not unreasonable just like that."

There were feathered tribe guards on the side who immediately came to defend, "Xue-zunzhu, please watch your tongue!"

"What, have I said anything improper? I haven't humiliated nor cursed your Elder Immortal, and everything I've said was the truth. My words only lacked the polite respect owed by a guest, but it's not unreasonable."

That feathered tribe folk heard Xue Zhengyong's response and became even more enraged, "YOU——!"

A bare hand glowingly white as jade reached out and stopped him. The Elder Immortal raised her head, and snorted coolly at Xue Zhengyong, "We've once heard rumours in the mortal realm that Xue-zunzhu of Sisheng Peak was a fickle man, while possessing strong spiritual powers, there was some lack in education and did not parse in word games. However, today, this venerable feels the rumours have lied to us. Xue-zunzhu, how full of reasons you are."

Xue Zhengyong also flashed her a smile, but there was no more mirth left in his eyes, "I'm but a vulgar man, pray the Elder Immortal not mind."

That Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe grinned, raised her hand and picked a tangerine, then very carefully peeled it before holding it out before Xue Zhengyong, "Then why don't you and I both take a step back. It will not be possible to give those two the same freedom as before, but staying in prison certainly isn't appropriate. This venerable one will order for Xia Sini to be released right now, and Mo Ran and Xia Sini will move their lodging to Campsis Pavilion. That's a place for receiving guests, the only thing is I must send people to watch over it, forbidding the two of them from taking even half a step out of the pavilion. Is this agreeable?"

Xue Zhengyong was silent for a bit, then he raised his hand, pausing in mid air, but in the end he still took that tangerine.

Although Campsis Pavilion was said to be a place for receiving guests, the Peach Blossom Springs didn't usually have guests. Thus, the interior of the pavilion had been neglected for a long time. Since the Elder Immortal permitted them to move to this place, Mo Ran had planned to go over and clean up first, then go pick up Xia Sini once everything was ordered and tidy.

Xue Zhengyong and Xuanji still had things to discuss, so under the watch of several feathered tribe folks, Mo Ran and Shi Mei went over to Campsis Pavilion first.

Campsis Pavilion was situated in the NorthWest of the Peach Blossom Springs. On the outside, blossoms were abundant like forests, the skies glowing brilliantly at the fall of dusk.

"This is a good place. Now even if we stay here we won't feel wronged." Mo Ran said happily.

Shi Mei sighed, "How can you not feel wronged? You two obviously didn't kill anyone, but the innocent was wronged. Too bad Shizun couldn't come. If he had come, then he could just use Tianwen to interrogate, and there wouldn't be any use for some truth pills before the truth is revealed."

"Haha, Shi Mei think things are too simple. Tianwen is a holy weapon, and while it has the ability to bring out the truth, whether if it's effective is entirely dependant on if the castor has the mind to interrogate. Do you think those birds would be willing to let my Shizun interrogate me? Do you think they'll believe him?"

"...That's true."

Seeing that the sun was about to set, Mo Ran started tidying the house while Shi Mei helped on the side.

It certainly was strange. Only when Mo Ran finished cleaning the house and sat down to rest and drink some tea, did he suddenly realize that he actually didn't feel any secret joy in being able to spend time alone with Shi Mei, nor did he feel charmed.

Mo Ran choked at the realization and almost spat out his tea.

Shi Mei jumped in surprise, "What's wrong?"

"N, nothing." Mo Ran waved his hands insistently, but his mind was shaken. Had he really been training under Chu Wanning for so long that he'd also turned into a soul unmoved? Take a look at this Campsis Pavilion. The place was desolate, not a soul around, the peach blossoms were swaying, and the single men were left alone with only each other. If this was the past then he for sure would've flirted hardcore with Shi Mei for a while before he got down to serious business.

What was it with him recently? Such purity of the mind, that shouldn't be...

Mo Ran scratched his head.

Shi Mei blinked.

Four eyes met, and Mo Ran cracked a dopey smile, his dimples precious and cute, "The peach blossoms outside are beautiful, I'll go pick a branch for you to take."

"Plants are sentient, just let them bloom properly on their branches." Shi Mei said.

"En... You're very right. Then, then I won't pick them!"

They sat there in silence, and Mo Ran dug through everything he could in his mind to start a conversation, but realized that with the lessening of days they saw each other, there was actually nothing worth talking about.

When he looked up, he suddenly saw Shi Mei had a thin sheen of sweat from helping him clean the residence. Unable to bear it, he took out a handkerchief from his robes and handed it to him.

"For you to wipe your sweat with."

"....." Shi Mei lowered his gaze to glance over, and saw Mo Ran was squeezing that handkerchief nervously and couldn't help but smile, replying gently, "Thank you."

Thus he took the handkerchief and lightly dabbed his forehead.

The feel of that cloth was light and soft, sewn with the best of silk, and after Shi Mei used it, he said, "I'll take the handkerchief back and wash it before I return it to you."

"Okok." Mo Ran answered promptly. His agreeableness towards Shi Mei was practically carved into his bones by now, it had become an innate ability, "If you like it, it's ok if you don't return it either."

Shi Mei laughed, "That's probably not right, look how well this handkerchief is made..." He said as he opened the handkerchief, smoothing out the creases to fold it again.

Yet just when those delicate, white and tender fingers felt over the opened handkerchief, Shi Mei was taken aback, and he let out a soft "eh".

"What is it?"

Shi Mei paused, and looked up with a smile, "A-Ran really wants to gift me this handkerchief?"

"If you like it then take it. What's mine is yours." Mo Ran was very generous.

Shi Mei's eyes were laughing, "Borrowing flowers from others to worship the buddha. Aren't you afraid that Shizun will find out and whip you?"

"Huh?" This time it was Mo Ran's turn to be taken aback. "What do you mean by borrowing flowers to worship the buddha? What does Shizun have to do with this?"

"Take a look yourself." Shi Mei's tone was a little unreadable, "Such a big haitang blossom. When did Shizun give you his own handkerchief?"

Ch.74 This Venerable One's Fault

"....."

Mo Ran was dumbstruck.

A long while passed before he snapped out of it, entire face bright red as he waved his hands frantically: "No, that uh, I dunno, this isn't mine, where did my handkerchief go?I, I-I, oh god, how am I gonna get out of this one....."

He stared at that square of silken cloth with a haitang flower sewn in a corner, but couldn't for the life of him remember why he even had it. He wracked his brain in a panic, then suddenly smacked his head.

"Ah!"

".....What is it....."

"I remembered!" Mo Ran let out a breath of relief and took the handkerchief back from Shi Mei's hands with a smile, "Sorry, this handkerchief isn't mine, so I can't give it to you."

Shi Mei: "....."

But I didn't even say I wanted it to start with?

"But it's not Shizun's either, it's not like everything with a haitang on it is Shizun's." Mo Ran folded the handkerchief neatly and tucked it back into his robes, beyond relieved that he hadn't accidentally taken Shizun's handkerchief, "It's Xia-shidi's."

Shi Mei looked thoughtful: "Xia-shidi's?"

"Mhm, since we've been living together these last few days, maybe I grabbed the wrong one from the drying rack this morning or something, haha, how embarrassing."

".....Mm, it's no big deal." Shi Mei smiled gently and stood up, "It's getting late, we should go pick up Xia-shidi."

They left the house and headed for the cave.

They didn't get far before Shi Mei started slowing down; it wasn't too obvious at first, but then he stumbled on a rock and would have fallen if Mo Ran hadn't reacted quickly and caught him in time.

Mo Ran was shocked at how pale he looked: "What's wrong?"

"It's nothing." Shi Mei took a deep breath and said, "I didn't eat much for lunch, just feeling a little faint, nothing a bit of rest won't fix."

But the more he tried to gloss over it, the more Mo Ran worried. Now that he thought about it, Shi Mei wasn't great at light footwork, and everything here at the Peach Blossom Springs, from food to clothes, costs feathers. He always made sure to give Shi Mei feathers before, but he had been locked up for some days, and Xue Meng was too thoughtless to take care of anyone.....

Mo Ran got more concerned the more he thought, so he pressed: "You used to skip lunch all the time back at the sect too, but I've never seen you in such a state before. Am I to believe you're like this after missing just one meal? Tell me the truth, when was the last time you ate?"

"I....."

Mo Ran's expression grew even darker at his refusal to answer. He grabbed him and started walking in the opposite direction.

Shi Mei fretted: "A-Ran, wh-where are we going?"

"Where the food is!" Mo Ran said sharply, but there was only worry in his eyes when he turned around, "Why didn't you take care of yourself while I was gone? You're always, always thinking about everyone else and putting others first! But what about yourself? Have you ever thought about yourself?"

"A-Ran....."

He dragged Shi Mei all the way to a tavern. Normally, Shi Mei belonged to the healing division and shouldn't be here in the attack division area without a token, but anxiety had been high ever since the incident with Eighteen, so the feathered tribe lifted that restriction to ease things.

"What do you want? Order whatever."

"Anything's fine." Shi Mei seemed a bit guilty, "Sorry, I wanted to come help, but ended up getting in the way instead....."

"No need for things like sorry between us." Mo Ran flicked his forehead and gentled his tone, "Go ahead and order, I'll pay for it and then you can take your time eating."

Shi Mei looked at him: "What about you?"

"I have to go pick up Xia-shidi. There's a guard around the cave but I'm still worried, what with the killer still being out there."

Hearing that Mo Ran wanted to leave, Shi Mei's eyes seemed to darken for an instant, but then he quickly said: "Just two buns then, I'll go with you and eat on the way."

Mo Ran was going to try and talk him out of it when the bird-like chitter of feminine voices came from the outside, and some dozen young female cultivators, all primped up, entered the building giggling.

"Hey shopkeep, I have a question." The lady at the head of the group asked with a smile, "Did dashixiong..... reserve the banquet room at this tavern tonight?"

"Indeed, indeed." The shopkeep was all smiles. It hadn't taken long for the feathered tribe folks to figure out that dashixiong liked wine and song, and held a banquet at one tavern or another every single night. And wherever this "dashixiong" went, a group of giggling ladies was sure to flock.

Sure enough, those ladies were thrilled and immediately hurried to reserve their tables, their words drifting over to Mo Ran's ears now and again.

It was all "Xiao-Fang, how does the painting on my eyebrows look? Do you think dashixiong will like it?" "It's lovely, what do you think about my eyeliner, is it too flashy, will it make him think I'm flighty?" and stuff like "You're so pretty, dashixiong will like you for sure, yesterday I saw him look at you quite a few times already." "Aiya stop teasing me, if only! Dashixiong's type is definitely someone like Jiejie who is so refined and well-read."

"....."

Even in such troubled times, these people could still flutter about thus over some guy. The corner of Mo Ran's mouth twitched and he turned to Shi Mei: "Buns it is then, let's grab and go, I'll worry if I leave you here alone in this cave of carnivorous beasts"

Looking at his expression, Shi Mei couldn't help shaking his head with a light laughter.

The tastiest thing on the menu here was their big, drool-worthy meatbun. Mo Ran bought ten at once and gave it all to Shi Mei. Glancing over at Shi Mei

nibbling happily on the buns as they walked, Mo Ran could finally relax a little.

No one expected the bun to do Shi Mei in.

His stomach was already weak to start with, to suddenly eat an oily bun after having had nothing in him for so long, it started hurting in no time.

Now Mo Ran really couldn't leave to go pick up Xia-shidi. He carried a pale and sweaty Shi Mei back to the Dewsip Pavilion in a frantic rush and laid him down on the bed he had just tidied, then rushed out to ask for a physician.

After some medicine and warm water, Mo Ran sat by the bed filled with self-blame as he looked at Shi Mei's pallid face: "Does it still hurt? Here, I'll rub your tummy."

Shi Mei's voice was quiet and weak-sounding: "No need..... it's ok....."

But Mo Ran's large and well-defined hand had already reached over, kneading gently through the quilt.

Maybe because the pressure was just right and it felt good, but Shi Mei didn't protest. His breaths evened out under the attentive kneading, and he fell asleep.

Mo Ran stayed until he was sound asleep before getting ready to leave.

But his hand was caught before he had even gotten up.

Mo Ran's eyes, black with a tinge of purple, widened: "Shi Mei.....?"

"It hurts..... don't leave....."

The beauty on the bed still had his eyes closed, and seemed to be sleepwalking.

Mo Ran stood locked in place; Shi Mei never asked anyone for anything, it was always him helping others without any expectation of the same in return. Only while asleep would he plead with Mo Ran to stay in such a soft voice.

So he sat back down, gazing fondly at that face he yearned for day and night while continuing to massage his stomach. Outside the lattice window, petals of peach blossoms drifted lazily as the sky darkened.

By the time Mo Ran suddenly remembered that he had told his little shidi he'd be back for dinner, it was already midnight.

"Oh no!" Mo Ran jumped to his feet, smacking his head over and over, "Oh no oh no oh no!!!"

Shi Mei was already deep in slumber by then; Mo Ran dashed outside and was about to sprint to the cave when a blue light flashed in the sky and Xuanji Elder descended from above with a child in his arms, the child holding a little clay jar.

"Xuanji Elder!"

Xuanji shot Mo Ran a reproachful glance: "What happened? Didn't you say you were going to go pick him up? If I hadn't been concerned and gone to check after all, Yu..... cough, my disciple would've had to wait til dawn in that cave."

"This disciple was wrong." Mo Ran lowered his head, but then couldn't help lifting his eyes to look at Chu Wanning, "Shidi....."

Xuanji put Chu Wanning down. Chu Wanning, still holding that clay jar, looked calmly at Mo Ran: "Have you eaten yet?"

Mo Ran hadn't expected that to be the first thing he would say, and could only reply dumbly: "N-not yet....."

So Chu Wanning walked over and offered him the jar, saying mildly: "Have some, it's still warm."

Mo Ran stood there motionlessly for a while. By the time he came back around, he had already pulled the little guy along with his clay jar into a hug.

"Okay, I will."

That silly child was worried that the soup might go cold, and had taken off his outer robe to wrap around the jar; his small body felt a little cold in Mo Ran's arms.

Mo Ran pressed their foreheads together, nuzzling softly, and for the first time in two lifetimes, he spoke these words and meant them: "Sorry, it was my fault."

They bid Xuanji good night and went inside the house.

The outer robe was too wrinkled to wear anymore, and Mo Ran worried that his shidi might get cold, so he went to the inner room to find him a blanket. Chu Wanning yawned and climbed onto a wooden bench holding the clay jar, and was about to take out two bowls for the soup when his gaze landed on the meatbuns that Shi Mei didn't finish, and he blinked.

"....."

Hopping off the bench, Chu Wanning walked over to the bedroom and looked expressionlessly at that beautiful person lying on the bed. He didn't get angry or say anything, but threads of coldness seeped out from his bones and he felt his heart, so warm only a moment ago, freeze into a solid block of ice.

When Mo Ran returned to the kitchen, Chu Wanning was sitting at the table next to the window as before, with one foot on the bench and the other dangling off, an arm propped casually on the windowsill.

Hearing the movement, he turned his head a little and shot a glance toward Mo Ran.

"Here, I found a fire fox fur blanket. Bundle up, it's cold at night."

Chu Wanning didn't reply.

Mo Ran walked over and handed him the blanket, but Chu Wanning didn't take it, only shook his head and then slowly closed his eyes, as if resting.

"What's wrong? You don't like it?"

"....."

"I'll go see if there's a different one then."

Mo Ran said with a smile as he ruffled Chu Wanning's hair, but when he turned to go look for another blanket, he suddenly found that the clay jar wasn't on the table anymore. He stared in confusion: "Where'd my soup go?"

"Who said it was yours." Chu Wanning finally spoke, his voice cold, "It's mine."

The corner of Mo Ran's lips twitched, thinking that he must be throwing a tantrum: "Okok, yours then. Where did your soup go?"

Chu Wanning said flatly: "I threw it away."

"Th-threw.....?"

Chu Wanning went back to ignoring him, hopping lightly off the bench and opening the door to leave.

"Hey? Shidi? Shidi where are you going?" Mo Ran forgot all about the blanket—the killer was still at large, it wasn't safe out there—and hastily chased after him.

He saw that little clay jar under the peach blossom tree; it hadn't been tossed after all. Mo Ran let out a breath, thinking that it was his own fault to start with, little shidi was probably just trying to hold back his grievances earlier, then couldn't hold back anymore and got mad after all, and he had every right to be mad.

So he walked over and sat down next to Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning sat under the peach blossom tree holding his little clay jar and ignoring Mo Ran. He opened the lid, took out a ladle bigger than his face, and tried to reach in with it, but it wouldn't fit and he threw the ladle in a fit of anger. The ladle struck the ground with a crack and broke into pieces, and he sat there holding the jar in a daze.

Mo Ran, with his head turned sideways and cheek propped up, suggested: "Just drink right out of it, it's just us two here anyway, no need to be embarrassed."

"....."

"No? I'm gonna drink it if you don't, it's the first time my Shidi has made soup for me, I'm not gonna let it go to waste." He teased and reached for the jar with a grin.

To his surprise, Chu Wanning slapped his hand away: "Get lost."

"....." Mo Ran blinked, feeling a bit of deja vu from this exchange, but then scooted back over with a grin on his thick face, "Shidi, I was wrong, please don't be mad anymore. I was gonna go pick you up long ago, but your Mingjing-shixiong suddenly fell sick so I got delayed, I didn't mean to keep you waiting."

Chu Wanning kept his head down and said nothing.

"No really, I was so busy the whole time, and haven't eaten yet. I'm starving." Mo Ran tugged on his sleeve pitifully, "Shidi, my kind shidi, my good shidi, please, may shixiong have some soup?"

"....."

Chu Wanning finally moved to place the jar of soup on the ground. He lifted his head a little and tilted it to the side a bit before turning away again, meaning for Mo Ran to help himself if he wanted it.

Mo Ran grinned: "Thanks shidi."

The little clay jar was stuffed full, just one glance and he could tell that shidi hadn't eaten much, leaving him the majority of the meat—it was mostly meat with a little bit of soup.

Mo Ran stared for a bit, eyes curved in amusement. He teased gently: "Are you sure this is soup? Looks more like chicken stew to me. Shidi is so generous."

"....."

He stopped chattering then; after spending half the day taking care of Shi Mei, he really was starving, and besides, shidi had worked so hard to make the soup, he couldn't possibly let his good intentions go to waste. He broke off two small branches from the peach tree, smoothing them into a pair of chopsticks with a burst of spiritual energy from his fingertips, and wasted no time in stuffing a piece of chicken into his mouth.

"Wah, delicious!"

Mo Ran said around a mouthful of steamy chicken: "It's really good, my shidi is so capable."

It actually wasn't that good, and a bit salty too, but Mo Ran still dug in heartily to make his little shidi happy, getting through most of the chicken in quick order. And the entire time, Chu Wanning sat there quietly without looking at him at all.

He gulped down a big mouthful of soup—it was even saltier than the meat, so much so that it was practically bitter, but it was still bearable.

Mo Ran scooped up another drumstick and was just about to shove it in his mouth when he suddenly froze: "How many legs does a chicken have?"

Of course there was no reply.

So he answered himself: "Two."

He looked at the drumstick held between his chopsticks, then looked at the bone from the other drumstick that he had just eaten.

"....."

The idiot finally lifted his head, dazed, and asked Chu Wanning: "Shidi, were you....." but he didn't have the courage to say the rest.

Were you waiting for me this whole time, and haven't even eaten yet?

The jar of soup is all meat, is it because you waited for me for so long that all the soup evaporated and there was only meat left, and that's all that was left to put into the jar, only to have me think.....

Only to have me think that you've already eaten..... and just left some for me..... that you cooked it wrong and turned chicken soup into chicken stew.....

Mo Ran put the clay jar down wordlessly.

But he had realized too late; there was hardly any meat left in there.

Chu Wanning finally spoke.

His voice was calm and even still, with a bit of youthfulness.

"You said you would be back for dinner. So I waited." He said slowly, flatly, "If you don't want it anymore, then at least send word so I'm not waiting like an idiot. Okay?"

"Shidi....."

Chu Wanning was still turned away, refusing to look at him. Mo Ran couldn't see his face.

"Have someone pass me a message that you're going to go keep Shi..... that you're going to go keep Mingjing-shixiong company instead. Would it have been that hard?"

"....."

"You took my jar and rambled so much before eating, but didn't even ask if I've eaten yet. Would it have been that hard?"

"....."

"Would it have been that hard to check and see how many drumsticks are in the jar first?" This last one sounded a little funny even with all the remorse he felt, but Mo Ran's dimples froze on his face before they had even formed.

His little shidi was crying.

He never would have cried over such a minor thing in his adult form; but no one knew that, although being turned into a child by the willow sap didn't affect his mind too much, there was some impact after all—his temperament became more childish whenever tired or overexerted.

This hidden property of the sap was extremely difficult to detect, so neither Madam Wang nor Tanlang Elder noticed when taking his pulse.

"I also feel hunger and sadness, I'm only human too....." Even with the younger mentality in the foreground of his mind, Chu Wanning still held onto his self-restraint, fighting back sobs without a sound, but his shoulders shook uncontrollably as tears welled up and fell from his reddened eyes.

All those years, Yuheng Elder had always endured it silently—no one liked him, no one kept him company, and he had always feigned nonchalance as he walked through the reverent crowd, lofty and composed.

Only with his mind tinged by childish thoughts would he break down and speak the truth, let out the misery that had been piling up for so long.

It wasn't that he didn't care for those around him, only that he did it quietly.

But such quietude, without anyone to see or notice, day after day, was also a kind of torment.

Watching the minute trembling of his little shidi's shoulders, Mo Ran's heart clenched and he reached out to soothe him, but his hand was slapped away before it even made contact.

"Shidi....."

"Don't touch me." Chu Wanning always put up a strong front, regardless of age. He firmly wiped away his tears and stood up, "I'm going to bed. You can go keep your shidi company, just stay away from me."

"....."

In his indignation, he even forgot that Shi Mei was older than Mo Ran.

Mo Ran opened his mouth to say something, but Chu Wanning had already left. He disappeared into the other bedroom and the door slammed shut with a loud bang.

There were only two bedrooms in the courtyard of Campsis Pavilion.

Mo Ran was planning to let Shi Mei sleep in one while he squeezed into the other with his little shidi, but he was so mad, and even locked the door, so it looked like shidi's room was out of the question.

And he didn't want to just climb into bed with Shi Mei either. Not to mention, having been scolded by his little shidi, and even made him cry, Mo Ran's head was a complete mess and he wasn't in any mood to think about lovey-dovey anything, so he simply sat there in the courtyard in a daze, surrounded by peach blossoms in full bloom, holding that clay jar that his little shidi had brought him all this way. A long while later, he sighed and slapped himself across the face, cursing in a low voice: "You good-for-nothing."

And so he spent the night with the ground as bed and the sky as blanket, lying on the ground covered in fallen peach blossom petals, staring blankly at the

sky.

Little shidi..... Shi Mei..... Shizun..... Xue Meng..... the fake Gouchen from Jincheng Lake, the unknown killer..... Chu Xun and his son in the illusion.....

Many blurry figures flashed through his mind; he vaguely felt like something was off, but the feeling was so faint that it disappeared before even he himself noticed.

Peach blossoms bloomed splendidly, petals drifting gently down.
Mo Ran caught a fallen blossom in his hand, holding the perished flower up against the moonlight.

He recalled the final moments of his previous life, when he had laid himself down into the coffin prepared ahead of time; that day, the sky was also adrift with fallen blossoms, soundless and fragrant.

Only they were haitang blossoms.

Haitang.....

The one he liked, in this life and last, was Shi Mei. But why, moments before death, had he chosen to bury himself under the haitang tree in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower, where he had first met Chu Wanning.

Many of the things he had done in his past life now frightened him to think about. After his rebirth, the longer time went on, the less he understood why he had been so cruel before.

Slaughtering entire cities, oppressing the weak, killing his master..... even forcing Chu Wanning to do things like *that* with himself.....

Mo Ran tossed the peach blossom away and laid his hand across his forehead, then slowly closed his eyes.

Little shidi's words earlier—"I also feel hunger and sadness, I'm only human too"—circled in his mind. The one who had said it was his little shidi, but for an instant, Mo Ran saw the silhouette of another person.

A person dressed in snow white robes; but then he blinked and the white robes had become red wedding robes that dragged on the ground, just the way he had looked during the ceremony in the ghost mistress's illusion.

"I'm only human too....."

I also feel sorrow and pain.
Mo Ran.....

I also feel pain.

Mo Ran suddenly felt a suffocating stuffiness in his heart, as if something was trying to burst out. A sheen of cold sweat covered his forehead.

He squeezed his eyes shut, drawing labored breaths.
Murmuring: ".....I'm sorry....."

He didn't know whom he was apologizing to—his little shidi, or that person in the wedding robes.....

Inside the bedroom, Shi Mei sat up.
Padding quietly over to the window without turning on the light, he looked through the gap in the window, gazing from afar at Mo Ran lying amongst the

fallen petals with an arm wrapped around the clay jar, his eyes dark, thoughts unknowable.

Early the next morning, Mo Ran wrinkled his nose from where he lay in the flowers and grass, inhaled a big breath of the fresh air, and stretched lazily before getting up.

But he only got halfway through the stretch when a shriek shattered the peace at the Campsis Pavilion.

“AAAH——!!!!!”

Mo Ran’s eyes flew open as he rolled to his feet. The sight before him made his blood run cold, and all he could do was stare in shock.

Each and every one of the fifteen feathered tribe elites assigned to guard the Campsis Pavilion had been murdered overnight in the exact same manner as Eighteen, with a willow vine glowing brightly scarlet wrapped around each of their necks.

——Jiangui! [what the hell!]

All of them dangled amongst the grove of peach blossom trees in full bloom, crimson sleeves drifting in the breeze, long skirts reaching to the ground, their bodies swaying in time with the wind like so many preserved flowers, eerie yet uncannily beautiful.

The one who had screamed was a low-ranking member of the feathered tribe who had come to deliver breakfast. She trembled in fright, the bamboo basket she held now laying on the ground, congee and pastries spilled all over.

She trembled even more violently upon seeing Mo Ran standing in the courtyard, and reached behind her for something.

Mo Ran stepped forward without thinking: “No wait, it’s not what.....”

But it was already too late—she had activated the Seal of Imminent Crisis tattooed on her lower back. The seal functioned as an urgent summoning of the feathered tribe, and in an instant, feathered tribe folks everywhere in the Peach Blossom Springs sprouted firey wings and descended upon the Campsis Pavilion.

All of them were stunned by the sight that greeted them.

“A-Jie!!!!”

“Jie——!!”

After the initial shocked silence, they burst into screams and wails. The commotion drew all the cultivators over as well. Shock and suspicion, anger and grief surrounded the Campsis Pavilion in no time.

“Mo Ran! Things have already come to this, what can you even say anymore!”

“Murderer! Lunatic!”

The gathering of feathered tribe was already beyond furious, screaming and crying: “He has to pay with his life! Kill him! KILL HIM!!”

It’d be a struggle for Mo Ran to defend himself even if he had a hundred mouths, and he only had one: “If I really was the killer, and could kill all of them this easily, then why would I stay here? To wait to get caught?”

A feathered tribe folk with flame-red hair and a tear-stained face spat: “You shut up! I-it’s already like this, and you still, you still dare to.....”

Someone else raged: "If you're not the killer, then why was everyone but you killed?"

"That's right!"

"Deceitful and treacherous!"

"Even if the killer isn't you, he's for sure related to you! Why else would he not kill you? Huh?!"

"Blood for blood!"

Mo Ran was so mad that he wanted to laugh.

He had slaughtered wantonly in the past life and hardly anyone ever dared to say something like "blood for blood" to him, yet now when he truly wasn't the killer, he was being accused to the high heavens; this world was really so..... he closed his eyes for a moment, and was about to say something when a crimson light shot through the sky.

The Elder Immortal of the feathered tribe descended lightly from the cloud and scanned her surroundings coldly, expression exceedingly dark.

"Mo Weiyu."

"Elder Immortal."

The Elder Immortal stared him down for a while, then walked over to one of the corpses and lifted the bloodstained willow vine wrapped around its neck.

"Where is your weapon? Take it out and show me."

"....."

"Are you refusing?"

Mo Ran let out a sigh. His weapon was Jiangui; who knows how many people had already seen it during training, and a bunch more saw when Eighteen was killed. If he were to take it out now, it will be compared with the willow vines around the necks of the murdered guards, and no doubt used to implicate him. But if he refused, then it would look like he had a guilty conscience.

A scarlet blaze appeared with a *woosh* in his palm as Jiangui took form, coursing with a firey, crackling flare, "Feel free to look, Elder Immortal."

Ch.75 This Venerable One is Illiterate, Deal With It

The gathered crowd gawked at Jiangui, then looked at the firey red willow vines wrapped around the necks of the murdered, and grew even more agitated.

"You did it! Just like when you killed Eighteen!"

"How could you be so cruel?"

"KILL HIM!!"

The clamoring hurt the Elder Immortal's head. With a hand pressed against her temples, she said coldly: "Mo Weiyu, I will ask you one last time: did you or did you not kill them?"

"I did not."

"Very well." The Elder Immortal nodded. Mo Ran let out a breath, thinking she was going to let him go, and was just about to express his gratitude for her wisdom and righteousness when she lifted a hand in a gesture of indifference and said in an ice-cold tone:

"This person has committed myriad transgressions and refuses to admit to his crimes. Seize him."

When Shi Mei came out after washing up and getting dressed, he saw Mo Ran being restrained with magic by over a dozen high level feathered tribe folks while another tied his wrists with immortal binding rope.

"What are you doing?!"

All color drained out of Shi Mei's face as he hurried to Mo Ran's side: "What happened?"

No one replied, but the corpses swaying eerily between the peach blossoms was answer enough. Shi Mei drew in a sharp breath and took a step back, bumping into Mo Ran's chest.

"A-Ran....."

"Don't panic, calm down." Mo Ran kept his eyes on the Elder Immortal while whispering to Shi Mei, "Go get Uncle and Xuanji Elder."

With the situation like this, these feathered tribe folks might not be open to reason, and if they decided to rip him apart no matter what, he had zero chance of winning, not with his current abilities. He needed Xue Zhengyong and Xuanji to step in as soon as possible.

Shi Mei left, and Mo Ran stood alone against those faces twisted by rage, gaze steady as he glanced them over one by one.

"Puh!"

A gob of phlegm suddenly flew out of the crowd toward him. Mo Ran moved to dodge, but the feathered folk who had spit it was too close, and it caught him anyway.

He turned around slowly and came face to face with a pair of scarlet eyes.

"You killed so many people and you dare to call for help? I'm going to put you down right now!!!!"

With that, a firey blaze gathered in his palm and hurtled directly toward Mo Ran!

Mo Ran stepped back and to the side, the scorching blaze singing his bangs as it shot past him and crashed into the peach tree behind him, snapping the sturdy trunk in half.

THUD—

The peach tree fell over, flowers scattering all over the ground like snow in the wind.

Mo Ran looked at the tree on the ground, then turned to look at the attacker: "I've said it already, but I didn't kill them. The truth pills will be ready in ten days, it won't be too late to seek your revenge then."

"Ten days? You'll have murdered everyone here by then!" That person roared furiously, "Give my zizi's life back!" And threw himself toward Mo Ran.

Dodging his attack once again, Mo Ran's eyes landed on the Elder Immortal looking on from the side with no intention whatsoever of stopping this. Mo Ran

felt a flare of rage and raised his voice in a bellow: "Hey! You old bird! Get a grip on your people!"

"....."

"Fucker." Mo Ran couldn't help cursing under his breath when she still refused to budge, "Pretending to be deaf-mute at this juncture, you wanna watch me get burned to death or something? If I'd known you shitty birds couldn't even tell right from wrong, I wouldn't have come to this shithole place to start with! Who wants to get wronged like this for no reason!"

The Elder Immortal's expression twitched slightly at his words, and there was a fierce 'thwap!' as she lifted her sleeve in a sweeping flourish——

That landed right on Mo Ran's face.

The feathered tribe may look like humans, but their way of thinking was quite different.

In the cultivation world, even the head of a small martial hall—much less the leader of an entire tribe—wouldn't jump to conclusions without definitive proof. But the feathered tribe was half-beast after all, and their blood ran thick with beast-like nature.

The color of the Elder Immortal's hair changed from black to bright scarlet, with what looked like steam rolling from each strand. Her eyes opened wide in a glare as she said darkly:

"Whom is your master? To produce such an uncouth disciple! Watch your mouth!"

At her words, the other feathered tribe folks began to shriek one after the other and close in on Mo Ran with murder written in their scarlet eyes.

Woosh!

An arrow of flame pierced through the sky directly toward Mo Ran's heart.

Mo Ran dared not take the threat lightly, and sparks coursed through the willow vine as he dodged while brandishing Jiangui in a block, but the shot was only a feint, and when he turned to block, a bereaved feathered tribe folk rushed his back with sword drawn!

Arrow in the front, sword in the back, there was no way out.

These half-beasts meant to kill him right here; Mo Ran steeled himself, called to mind how Chu Wanning had wielded Tianwen before, and raised his hand with a flick of the wrist——

Jiangui flung into the air then abruptly pulled taunt, the blood-red willow vine whirling into a blur and creating a massive vortex, the leaves on the vine instantly turning sharp as knives as the maelstrom pulled in everything in the vicinity, even the air itself, and shredded it all into pieces.

One of Chu Wanning's ultimate techniques——"Wind!"

With the vine as the eye of the storm, everything in the surroundings was pulled in by powerful spiritual energy.

Swallowed by the vortex, ground into dust and swept away by the wind until nothing remained!

"AHH!!!!!!" The attacker screamed; her arrow had already been pulverized by Jiangui, and her long sword too was lost in the storm from being too close.

"Clang!" Came the sharp sound of metal breaking, and before anyone could react, she had also been pulled to the edge of the blood-red storm, shrieking: "Let me go! You lunatic! You fucking lunatic!!"

The Elder Immortal flew into a rage at seeing her own people in danger, red robes fluttering as she rose into the air.

A brilliantly red crystal of high purity appeared in her hand, and her sleeves billowed as she channeled spiritual energy into it. Instantly, a frenzied gale picked up, sweeping clouds along and flattening grass and trees alike.

The image of a fire phoenix blazed into being behind her; her eyes were a deep, unsettling red, and that originally beautiful face was now twisted.

"Bastard." She hissed, "Still not standing down?"

"You've even called out your phoenix, if I stop now wouldn't that just be asking for death?" The phoenix cast a massive shadow over Mo Ran, its fiery reflection dancing across his face, "You stop first, then I will!"

"You——"

The Elder Immortal rose even higher into the air.

"Have——"

Her blood-red eyes stared Mo Ran down as she spit out each syllable.

"No right——"

"To make demands——"

"Of me!"

An explosive sound came from above, then the phoenix dived toward Mo Ran with a screech!

"BANG!!!"

Another deafening sound, louder than the last, like the awakening of an ancient dragon from its thousand year slumber, smashing through stone and earth to burst forth from the depths of the ground.

The phoenix was met by a golden light, the force of their impact sending shockwaves through the air. The weaker members of the feathered tribe shrieked as the gales knocked into them, some even spitting blood as they were tossed out dozens of feet away.

The tempest swept through Campsis Pavilion, instantly obliterating trees and buildings alike into level ground!

When the dust settled, there was a slender, familiar figure in the air, blocking in front of Mo Ran.

"Sh-Shizun.....?!"

Robes white as snow, sleeves billowing in the wind. Hearing the call, his face turned slightly, expression cold and composed as ever, phoenix eyes sweeping over Mo Ran where he was kneeling on the ground.

Chu Wanning's voice was cold and deep, like clear water from the well on a hot summer's day.

"Are you injured?"

Mo Ran was too stunned to even react, eyes wide and mouth opened in shock: "....."

Chu Wanning looked him up and down, didn't find any obvious injuries, so turned back to the Elder Immortal: "Weren't you asking whom his master was a

moment ago?"

He released his terrifyingly strong spiritual energy, and slowly descended to the ground.

He said, coldly and simply, with not a single word more than he had to say: "Chu Wanning of Sisheng Peak, show me your best move."

"Wh-what?"

Chu Wanning frowned.

Looks like these bird people don't understand politeness. Fine by him; he was out of patience anyway.

"I said, I am his master." A pause, "And I don't remember giving you permission to hurt my disciple."

The Elder Immortal may be called an immortal, but it was only because of her noble bloodline—she was far from being an actual immortal. In their exchange just now, her phoenix was shattered by Chu Wanning and her arm was slashed by Tianwen. She wore a sour expression as she held her arm, black colored blood seeping from between her fingers.

"H-how dare you, a mere mortal! Also, who let you into the Peach Blossom Springs! How did you even get in here!!!" She was almost crazed, "You conceited——"

"*THRASH!*"

Tianwen appeared with a summon and lashed right across her face, splitting the corner of her lips and spilling blood.

"Yes, go on?" Chu Wanning said with a cold smile as he smoothed down the sleeve that got a little disarranged from brandishing Tianwen, then he grabbed Mo Ran by the collar and dragged him up with one hand, eyes never once leaving the Elder Immortal this entire time, "You were saying, I'm a conceited what?"

"H-h-how dare you, you——"

"Why wouldn't I dare." Chu Wanning looked at her, unimpressed, "What would I be afraid of?" He paused, then dragged Mo Ran over, "Listen up, this person is mine, I'm taking him."

Mo Ran hadn't even recovered from his shock at Chu Wanning's sudden, god-like descent yet when he was smashed into smithereens by "this person is mine."

"Sh..... Shizun....."

"Shut your trap." Chu Wanning's face was impassive as ever, but Mo Ran could clearly see the anger simmering in his eyes, "All you ever do is bring me trouble, can't do anything right"

The lecture was punctuated with a slap to the back of his head, then Chu Wanning took off into the air with Mo Ran in tow, and was already some dozens of feet away in a single leap. By the time Mo Ran realized what was even happening, they were already at the barren outskirts of the Peach Blossom Springs.

"Shizun! My shidi is still back there——"

Chu Wanning glanced at him and let out a cold hmpf at the panic on his face: "Shidi? The one named Xia?"

"Yeah, he's still at the Campsis Pavilion, I have to go save him....."

Chu Wanning lifted a hand to interrupt: "I already sent him to Xuanji with a spell, there's no need to worry."

Mo Ran finally let out the breath he was holding and lifted his eyes to look at Chu Wanning: "Shizun, why.....are you here?"

Chu Wanning was woken up by the commotion outside his room, and seeing that the situation was dire, quickly took one of Tanlang's pills to temporarily regain his normal form. But he couldn't tell Mo Ran that right now, so he only said coldly: "Why can't I be here." before lifting a hand and forming a golden haitang on the tip of a finger.

"Flowers withered outside the melancholy tower; a spring breeze through the night down to the QianTang River."

Chu Wanning lowered his eyelashes and blew gently at the flower bud, which bloomed instantly with a flourish of light resplendent. He flicked his slender fingertip and commanded quietly: "Seek."

The haitang flower drifted away with the wind and disappeared into the forest.

Mo Ran asked curiously: "Shizun, what spell was that?"

"Flower Toss."

"Wha?"

"Flower Toss." Chu Wanning's expression was totally serious, without the slightest hint of a joke, "It didn't have a name, but since you asked, I gave it one just now."

Mo Ran: "....."

This person cannot possibly be this lazy?

"Sect Leader already told me what happened." Chu Wanning gazed in the direction where the haitang had gone, voice deep and cold as ever like jade in the flow of a stream, "The person behind this is likely the same one behind the incident at Jincheng Lake. I'm afraid that Zhenlong Chess Formation has been set here at the Peach Blossom Springs as well."

"How could that be?" Mo Ran was startled.

He excelled at Zhenlong Chess Formation in the previous lifetime, and when Eighteen was killed, he had already checked for signs of its use; this forbidden technique was always accompanied by the stench of blood—once unleashed, killing was inevitable—so one only had to look for seemingly unfounded yet intense resentful energy to know if Zhenlong Chess Formation had been deployed in the vicinity. If that mysterious person had indeed used this forbidden technique again, he would have had to pull it off perfectly for Mo Ran to be unable to detect it.

There was a tinge of suspicion in the look Chu Wanning threw him, and Mo Ran hurried to explain: "I mean..... they're all half-immortal here at the Peach Blossom Springs, how could they not know if a forbidden technique had been used here?"

Chu Wanning shook his head: "That person had already shown themselves to be capable of controlling all of the ancient spiritual beasts at Jincheng Lake. Although spiritual beasts are nowhere near holy beasts in terms of strength, they

are equipollent to demi-immortals. Since he could control Jincheng Lake back then, he is very likely doing the same at Peach Blossom Springs right now."

"I see....."

"Mn."

Mo Ran lifted his head, a bashful grin on his face framed with dimples:
"Shizun, what does equipollent mean?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

Author's Notes:

System hint: Good afternoon, your friend [Little Boy Xia Sini] has gone offline, and your friend [Beidou Immortal Chu Wanning] has come online. If you have any difficulties and require help, you can summon him to your side; if a battle is required, Chu Wanning is not responsible for footing the cost of collateral damage. Please carry out the summoning in an open area, and ensure that the surroundings are free of dangerous character [Taxian-Jun Mo Weiyu] who will nerf Beidou Immortal. We wish you a happy summoning!

Ch.76 This Venerable One Meets That Guy Again

>>little bit gory

Chu Wanning had never been a kindly teacher type, and Mo Ran wasn't a five year old at his first lesson either; a hammy question like that didn't even warrant a response, so Chu Wanning, lashes lowered, ignored it.

The haitang flower that he had sent off with a speed-boosting wind spell quickly scouted through the entire Peach Blossom Springs. Mere moments later, a golden amulet drifted down from the sky into his hand.

"The Ancestral Abyss?"

The Ancestral Abyss was where they went every day to pluck feathers from the angry owls that dwelled there. The feathered tribe people had said before that the bottom of the abyss was filled with roaring flames, and that anyone, other than the angry owls that have lived there since ancient times, to slip and fall in there would get melted until there was nothing left.

Chu Wanning set a concealment barrier on both of them to avoid detection by the feathered tribe. They arrived at the Ancestral Abyss and looked down. There was an eerie red light and no bottom to be seen, with thousands of owls perched along the walls of the steep cliffs, currently slumbering with their heads tucked into their wings, packed so densely that they looked like countless dots on the cliffside from this distance.

According to Chu Wanning's conjecture, if the Zhenlong Chess Formation was indeed set up within the abyss, then all this about fierce flames and getting burnt until not even ashes were left should all just be made-up.

"But how can we be sure that the fire down there isn't actually dangerous?" Mo Ran stared at the eerie light down below, murmuring, "Looks real enough to me."

"Throw something in first."

"I'll go grab a rabbit then."

"No need." Chu Wanning leapt up with a flutter of his pristine robes and disappeared into the forest of peach trees nearby. Then, a moment later, he fluttered back like an immortal exiled from the ninth heaven, a branch of peach blossoms in hand.

Mo Ran understood—peach blossoms were even more fragile than rabbits, so if the peach blossoms could handle the supposed "fierce flames", then it would obviously pose no danger to people.

Chu Wanning ran a finger lightly down the branch as he mouthed a spell, covering it with a soft layer of translucent blue light. He pointed toward the abyss and said: "Go on."

The peach blossom floated gently down; one foot, two feet, ten feet, a hundred feet.

The branch was too far away to see now, but Chu Wanning could still sense the condition of the flowers from the spell he had cast. He waited with eyes closed for a while before opening them.

"The flowers are fine. Let's go."

Since Chu Wanning was this certain, there was no need to say anything else, so Mo Ran immediately leaped into the Ancestral Abyss alongside him. Both of them were proficient in the martial arts, and nimbly arrived at the bottom with ease. But when he saw the scene down here, even though he was already mentally prepared, Mo Ran still felt a shiver run down his spine.

He knew what that eerie red light was now.

Thousands of crosses stood at the bottom of the abyss, with a member of the feathered tribe tied to each one, completely naked and drenched in blood. There was a lingchi^[2] fruit stuffed into each of their mouths, the fruit emitting a piercing red light. From above, the collective light of these thousands of fruits easily looked like flames burning deep in the abyss.

Chu Wanning's face looked terrible; he was well-learned, so of course he knew that this red colored fruit was the forbidden fruit that made everyone in the cultivation world go pale at the very mention of it. Putting this fruit into the mouth of a person on the verge of death would extend their last moment into three hundred and sixty five days.

In other words, that person would be denied their release and forced to suffer an excruciatingly slow death instead, extending the instant cessation of the heart into ceaseless torment, thus termed lingchi.

Staring at the throngs of feathered tribe living-dead, dense as a forest, Mo Ran murmured: ".....Soul Locking Array."

Using the still-living as human pillars, resentful energy could be confined therein and prevented from leaking out, even with thousands of souls trapped within a Zhenlong Chess Formation!

No wonder he couldn't sense the slightest bit of resentful energy indicating the presence of a Zhenlong Chess Formation.

Mo Ran couldn't help but shudder as he wondered if the fake Gouchen from Jincheng Lake truly was the person behind the scenes here at the Peach Blossom Springs.

Based on what happened at Jincheng Lake, it seemed that the fake Gouchen only knew the bare basics of Zhenlong Chess Formation, just enough to control the creatures of the lake. But this time, all of the fake feathered tribe folks out there in the Peach Blossom Springs, other than being a bit dumb and

emotionally stunted, were practically indiscernable from the original, even being capable of using the unique magicks of the feathered tribe—it was clear that the grasp of the forbidden technique this time was at least comfortably adept; could the fake Gouchen truly have become this proficient this quickly?

Chu Wanning walked into the center of the Soul Locking Array, where there stood a crystal pillar.

There was a feathered tribe person tied to the crystal pillar as well, only this one was dead, the lingchi fruit in her mouth long since withered, her body in the beginning stages of decomposition. But her identity was clear enough from the yellow robes she wore, embroidered in golden thread with a phoenix, and the star-shaped mark between her brows.

“This is.....”

Mo Ran, startled: “This is the real Elder Immortal!”

“Correct.” Chu Wanning looked at the forest of human pillars, stretching out as far as the eye could see, and said quietly, “So many of the feathered tribe were captured for use in the Soul Locking Array, at least eight hundred, if not a thousand. The Elder Immortal definitely wouldn’t have tolerated this were she still alive. I thought it was odd earlier, when I exchanged blows with that Elder Immortal on the outside, that she didn’t even seem to be as strong as the ghost mistress of CaiDie Town. If I’m not wrong..... it seems that the feathered tribe of Peach Blossom Springs has already been wiped out, and all those outside right now are merely walking corpses under the control of Zhenlong Chess Formation.”

“!!!” Sure enough! Chu Wanning had come to the same conclusions as himself! Mo Ran turned to leave as soon as he recovered from his shock, but Chu Wanning blocked his path with a wave of his sleeve.

“Where are you going?”

“I have to go tell Uncle and the others. If this is the case, then it’s far too dangerous here.”

“Don’t be too hasty.” Chu Wanning shook his head, “Right now, we’re out in the open, but the enemy is hidden in the shadows. There are many cultivators at the Peach Blossom Springs, and we don’t know who’s the one pulling the strings, acting rashly might make things worse.”

“Hehe. Long time no see. Chu-zongshi is still so cautious.”

A small giggle came from above, but the sound was no different from that of thunder striking the depths of the Ancestral Abyss. Both of their heads snapped up as blood drained from their faces, only to see a mangled child of the feathered tribe sitting on a branch sticking out from the cliffside, kicking his legs. The dead child tilted his head, a pair of eyeballs soaked in bloody tears rolling around in their sockets, and grinned brightly at them.

Mo Ran: “Zhenlong Chess Formation!”

Chu Wanning cursed under his breath: “Another white chess piece.”

“Ehehe, that’s right, another white chess piece.” The child clapped gleefully, terrifyingly, “What, did you think I would come here personally? I’m not dumb.”

Mo Ran: “So you *are* that fake Gouchen from Jincheng Lake! What do you want, you madman?”

“Hehe, who do you think you are, some no-name sproutling, you aren’t even fit to speak to me. Tell your master to do the asking himself.”

“YOU——!”

Chu Wanning's slender fingers came out from his wide sleeve with a sweep to hold down a Mo Ran who was so pissed off there was practically smoke rising from his head. Looking up with a lifting of his eyelashes, he asked coldly: “What are you trying to accomplish?”

The child continued to kick his legs. He was clearly already dead, but under the control of the forbidden technique, he moved nonstop, making all kinds of gestures like a puppet on a string.

“Oh, nothing much, really.”

Chu Wanning's voice dropped several degrees in temperature: “Then why do you keep coming after my disciple?”

“My plan is nothing too important, but I just so happen to need your little disciple's spiritual core for it.” The child said, beaming, “He can only blame himself for having such a fine core. It's even better than yours by far. I already noticed back at Jincheng lake that he's a superb wood elemental spiritual essence; if not for that, I might be more interested in you instead, Chu-zongshi.”

Mo Ran was about to gag at the way he spoke in a child's voice but all greasily and with such an adult tone. He snapped: “If I'm ever so god damn unlucky as to get caught by you, I'll immediately self-destruct my fucking core, so don't even think about touching me!”

“It's not like I *want* to touch you.” The child continued to speak in that infuriating, honey-sweet tone, “I'm only chasing you around cause I have to. All men love beauties, your Shizun is much prettier than you, I'd rather touch him.”

“YOU!!!!!!” Mo Ran bristled, “Some ugly thing like you, hiding behind white chess pieces all day long too afraid to even show your ugly mug, think you have any right to touch my Shizun?”

The child only rolled his eyes at him, as if tired of acknowledging his existence, and turned back to Chu Wanning:

“Chu-zongshi, back at Jincheng Lake, I already advised you to leave things alone, but you just wouldn't listen. I'm so hurt~”

“Since this matter has come to my attention, even if you stop coming after Mo Ran now, I still intend to get to the bottom of things.”

“Pfft, I knew you'd say that.” The child was quiet for a moment, then grinned again, “Why are you righteous zongshi types all so stubborn?Fine, since Chu-zongshi won't leave well enough alone, we'll just have to wait and see then. I wanted to see which is stronger, anyway: your Tianwen, or my forbidden techniques.”

Chu Wanning's brows furrowed as he said darkly: “Must you slaughter so many innocents for your ends?”

“The people of the world are like the oranges from HuaiNan.”

“What do you mean?”

“Sour.” The child started giggling, “Super sour. All these worthless people are sour, I hate them, I want to crush them, step on them.”

Mo Ran: “.....”

Chu Wanning's voice was filled with killing aura: “You are truly irredeemable.”

"Zongshi deems me irredeemable, but I think Zongshi is just as incorrigible. Our justice differs to start with, why sweat the details." The child tilted his head to and fro, "Just think of our little spat as a game of chess. You won the match last time at Jincheng Lake, and, as for this one here at the Peach Blossom Springs, since Zongshi has already found the Ancestral Abyss and seen my white chess piece, and I've run out of tricks to acquire your little disciple, let's just say you won this one too."

He paused, then squinted his eyes in a smile, but only squeezed out more blood in so doing.

"But you better watch out. You may have protected him this time, but I wonder if you can protect him his whole life."

"....."

"As for the secret down here, I suggest you keep it to yourselves." The child said, holding a red and gold feather between his fingers.

Mo Ran noted with alarm: "The golden feathers used as currency in the Peach Blossom Springs?"

"That's right." He smiled, "These feathers have circulated everywhere by now. If the two of you keep quiet and leave by yourselves, then nothing will happen. But if you don't behave and try to reveal me..... these feathers are imbued with the resentful energy of the feathered tribe; they won't kill those cultivators, but they can dissipate the better part of their cultivation."

Mo Ran said with anger in his voice: "You planned this from the start?!"

"Well of course?" The child said, incredulous, "Did you think everyone was a dumb brute like you?"

Mo Ran: "....."

He was so, pissed, off!!!! He'll admit that he was rather straightforward when doing things, and that he didn't know much about schemes and strategies, but to get so overtly called out by this little bastard, he really wanted to summon Jiangui and give him what for, teach him what it means to be a real dumb brute.

"Chu-zongshi, I'm sure you know what's best for everyone involved. Even if they learn the truth, with their cultivation greatly damaged, I'm afraid they won't thank your righteousness."

Chu Wanning replied coldly: "And I'm sure you've already heard earlier when you were eavesdropping, I wasn't planning to alarm them to begin with for the time being."

"For the time being? Haha, so Zongshi was planning to say it later then. But there's no point to that, either." The child beamed as he spoke, "Once these people leave, I'll destroy the Peach Blossom Springs just like I did Jincheng Lake. Good luck getting anyone to believe you with no evidence."

Chu Wanning's gaze was icy: "I'm impressed that you had the nerve to call Mo Ran a dumb brute when you conduct yourself thus."

The child didn't mind Chu Wanning's derision in the least. He got up and twirled in place a couple times, then a flame suddenly flared to life at his feet and slowly burned through his flesh and bones.

"Why don't you save that for when you catch me? Chu-zongshi, out of respect for your character, I'll remind you one last time: stay out of this. If you still refuse to listen, then we..... will certainly meet again....."

The flames roared into the sky in an explosion.

The feathered tribe child used as a puppet was burnt into nothingness. A translucent white chess piece fell from the sky, twirled a couple times on the ground, and stilled.

There was nothing but silence for a while.

"....." Mo Ran knew that person wasn't just spouting empty threats, but he also didn't want to just take it sitting down, so he asked, "Shizun, are we really just going to leave like this? Do you have any other ideas?"

"Best not to take any chances for now. Let's leave the Peach Blossom Springs first." Chu Wanning's expression was dark as well, "Since that person went to the trouble of putting down a Soul Locking Array to prevent others from noticing his use of the Zhenlong Chess Formation, that means he still wants to keep things under wraps, at least for now. I will send word to the Sect Leader to take Xue Meng and Shi Mei and leave as soon as possible, without alarming the enemy. As for you....."

Chu Wanning paused, then continued: "He was after you, both times. This time around, he planned to frame you with the hopes of isolating you from help. You don't have to do anything further in this matter, the Sect Leader can step in and take care of it."

"What should I do, then?" Mo Ran asked, "It wouldn't be right to make others take care of my mess while I sit on my hands and do nothing."

"What are you trying to prove at this juncture? It's obvious what that person is after—the holy tree at Jincheng Lake fell, so he's been looking for a replacement. You are a wood elemental spiritual essence, suitable for his purposes, but if he can't get to you, then he'll go for the next best thing, and look for something else as substitute." Chu Wanning paused before continuing, "And once he finds that something, it will only be another massacre. He must be stopped."

"That's not wrong, but Shizun, it's not like spiritual essences are all that easy to find. If he wants to find a substitute, he'll have to....."

Mo Ran suddenly stopped talking and lifted his head, staring at Chu Wanning for a while before continuing: "If that little bastard wants to find other spiritual essences, he'll have to check sect by sect. But cultivators don't release their spiritual foundation without cause, the foundation is only let out when choosing a new weapon or refinement crystal in order to check for compatibility. So the simplest way to test for the essence is to sell weapons and refinement crystals. Which means, if we just keep watch on the weapon markets near the sects in the coming days, we'll have a pretty good chance of sniffing that bastard out."

After saying all that, he noticed Chu Wanning looking at him thoughtfully, and couldn't help second-guessing himself.

"Uh..... I guess?"

"It's a good guess." Chu Wanning said slowly, but then, a moment later, felt like he knew a little too much, and narrowed his eyes in suspicion, "Mo Ran. Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Wh-what would I even have to hide from Shizun?" Mo Ran said, but the hairs on his back were standing on end, and he felt as if Chu Wanning's eyes, clear as glass, were staring right through this reborn body of his, directly at the soul cowering within.

A moment passed in silence, and Chu Wanning thankfully didn't press the subject.

Lowering his eyelashes, he said: "Starting now, you will go with me to covertly investigate the major sects. We will not be returning to Sisheng Peak for the time being."

Author's Notes:

Peach Blossom Springs BOSS: I'm someone who looks at appearances. Your shizun looks better than you, so my attitude towards him is nicer.

Mo Ran: MMP*, didn't the author say I'm the best-looking?

*[abbreviation of Sichuan vulgarity 妈卖批, meaning "Your mom whores herself out"]

Meatbun: Yes, but, firstly, you're still physically a youth, and haven't grown into your looks. Secondly, the boss may be a straight dude, but if he were gay, his nature is similar to yours. Do you think he'll find your type more appealing, or Shizun's type more appealing?

Mo Ran: Is there no boss who's full of bottom energy?

Meatbun: There is.

Meatbun (turning her head) : Xue Meng Meng, your cousin's inviting you to be the boss!!!

Up next, Shizun's and Dog's main plotline is going to begin~

There are no knives for the moment, but be careful regardless when you see flashbacks, whenever there are flashbacks there are only two possibilities:

One, flying daggers.

Two, street racing. (TL note: smut = car)

I won't put any more warnings for the 0.5 timeline, once you see that timeline, just be mentally prepared for these two things.

Ch.77 This Venerable One Feels Very Awkward

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran left the Peach Blossom Springs and went all over the place looking for information on when the markets open at the various sects. After several days of hasty travels, they finally decided to stay a night at a small town inn.

They hardly got any rest since leaving the Peach Blossom Springs, so Mo Ran had already retired to his own room a while ago. Sitting at the table, Chu Wanning lit the candle and contemplated the porcelain bottle in his hand under its warm yellow light.

Inside the white jade porcelain bottle were thirty some golden-colored pills.

It was fortunate that Xuanji had brought this bottle with him when he came; if not for that, he really didn't know what identity he would've had to assume with Mo Ran.

"This is new medicine from Tanlang, there's about thirty in there." Xuanji had told Chu Wanning back at the cave, "He did some research in the ancient

archives and changed some ingredients, so one pill will allow you to regain your normal form for seven days. Here, these will last you a while."

"Send Tanlang my thanks."

"There's no need for thanks." Xuanji smiled with a wave of his hand, "Tanlang puts on a stern face, but he's the most curious about your condition. Oh, right, he also said to let you know that this medicine isn't too stable, and intense emotions might cause it to lose its effectiveness, so be careful about that."

Chu Wanning was caught up in his thoughts about what Xuanji had said when he heard knocks from the door. He quickly tucked the porcelain bottle away and extinguished the incense in the burner before saying: "Come in."

Mo Ran, having just gotten out from the bath, walked into Chu Wanning's room wearing only a thin bathrobe while wiping his long hair that was dark as black jade.

"....." Chu Wanning cleared his throat, thankful that his face remained neutral, "What is it?"

"My room is no good, I don't like it. Shizun, can I sleep on your floor tonight?"

Mo Ran was being so vague, and Chu Wanning wasn't that gullible, so of course he sensed that something was up: "What don't you like about it?"

"I-it's just..... just no good." He snuck a glance at Chu Wanning, mumbling, "The sound insulation is terrible."

Chu Wanning furrowed his brows, too noble and chaste by nature to catch his meaning. He pulled on his outer robe without another word and walked barefoot over to Mo Ran's room. Mo Ran couldn't stop him even if he tried, and could only follow after.

"It's a little bare, but not so much as to be intolerable." Chu Wanning stood in the room and looked around, a note of scolding in his voice, "When did you get so spoiled?"

Just then, a burst of crashing sounds came from the room next door, like something heavy falling to the floor.

Mo Ran really couldn't bear to listen to any more, so before things get even worse, he reached out and tugged the corner of Chu Wanning's sleeve, pleading: "Shizun, let's leave already."

Chu Wanning's brows furrowed: "Really, what's the matter with you? Just what do you find so objectionable?"

Mo Ran opened his mouth, but before he could get his words together, coquettish giggles drifted over from across the wall: "Chang-gongzi is so naughty, always bullying me, nnh, n-no wait..... ah!"

"Hehe, babe, this peony at your chest is so pretty, let me take a whiff, see if it smells nice too."

The walls were so thin that even the rustling of clothes on the other side could be heard, the rough pants of the man and the sweet moans of the woman mingling together into something truly harrowing to hear.

Chu Wanning actually didn't understand what was happening at first. It wasn't until a few moments later that he suddenly put two and two together, pretty eyes flying wide open while the color of his face changed rapidly from

white to red to blue and then finally settled on ashen as he cursed: "Shameless!" and stormed angrily out of the room with a sweep of his sleeve.

"Pfft."

Mo Ran failed to hold it in and started laughing quietly from behind. Luckily, Chu Wanning was so flustered that even his arms were swinging out of sync as he walked stiffly away, and so didn't notice Mo Ran laughing at him.

Only after getting back to his room and downing a whole cup of tea did he finally regain some semblance of composure. He nodded toward Mo Ran: "Such obscene speech is indeed detrimental to cultivation. You may stay here tonight."

"Oh." Truth be told, Mo Ran was beside himself with shock and happiness in equal measure when Chu Wanning suddenly appeared at the Peach Blossom Springs and did everything to protect him without doubting him in the slightest, and now that things have calmed down, he couldn't help feeling all giddy. Right now, under the candle light, Shizun's habitually impassive face somehow seemed a lot cuter.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor with his chin propped up, Mo Ran's eyes curved into a smile as he stared at Chu Wanning.

".....What are you looking at?"

"I haven't seen Shizun for so long, just wanna take an extra look." Voice full of smiles, gaze warm and bright.

Now that he's looking, Chu Wanning..... really does look quite like Xia-shidi.

Chu Wanning glared at him: "Instead of looking at me, go wipe your hair dry instead, how are you going to sleep with it dripping like that."

"I forgot the towel in my room." Mo Ran grinned, "Shizun do it for me?"

"....."

There was a period of time before when Xue Meng got injured and couldn't lift his arm, and every time he washed his hair, Shizun would always wipe it dry for him. He always did it very quickly by regulating his spiritual energy to warm the towel and evaporate the water.

Chu Wanning looked at Mo Ran and his perfectly functional limbs, then hmph'd coldly: "You're neither sick nor injured, why would I do it for you?"

But still waved him over.

The candle cast its warm light on Mo Ran's incomparably handsome face.

Almost a year had already gone by since his rebirth, and he was just at that age when growth spurts happened; without even really noticing it, he had gotten quite a bit taller these past few months. Right now, sitting on the bed, he was nearly the same height as Chu Wanning.

This kind of height made it a little difficult for Chu Wanning to wipe his hair, so Mo Ran leaned back on his arms and shifted his body lower. Standing at the side of the bed, Chu Wanning wiped at his long hair with an exasperated expression.

Mo Ran yawned contentedly, closing his eyes to enjoy this rare moment of peace.

Outside the window, a frog croaked now and again.

"Shizun."

"Mn."

"Did you know? The feathered tribe's illusion sent me back to Lin'an, two hundred years ago, and I met someone named Chu Xun."

The wiping movement didn't even pause: "How would I know that."

Mo Ran rubbed his nose with a grin: "He looked just like you."

".....There's plenty of similar-looking people out there, nothing strange about that."

"No, really." Mo Ran said, all serious, "He was practically made from the same mold as you. Shizun, do you think he might be your ancestor?"

Chu Wanning replied mildly: "It's possible. But, something from two hundred years ago, who can say?"

"He had a son." Mo Ran continued, "Who looked just like Xia-shidi. I feel like all this is a bit too much to be just coincidence, Shizun, maybe Xia-shidi is a lost relative of yours?"

"I don't have any relatives."

"That's why I said lost....." Mo Ran mumbled. He was so close to Chu Wanning that he could smell the light, soothing scent of haitang.

It smelled so good. No matter which lifetime, Chu Wanning's scent always seemed to calm him down; in the past life, whenever he returned from a bloodbath, he always had to bury his face into the crook of Shizun's neck just to breathe again.

Whether he wants to admit it or not, he was already hopelessly addicted to Chu Wanning's scent.

He closed his eyes and slowly relaxed into the familiar peace, mind drifting in the flow of time.

Last lifetime, returning to the empty Wushan Palace after another slaughter, soaked head to toe in rain, he had clearly committed so many sins, but was nothing more than a drenched stray with no home to speak of.

At that time, he would sit and wrap his arms around Chu Wanning's waist, bury his face against his abdomen, have him stroke his hair over and over again —it was the only way to calm the madness inside.

Those bygone dreams were already things of the past, of another life.
But with his eyes closed like this, they seemed like only yesterday.

Noticing that the chattery guy had stopped talking, Chu Wanning lowered his lashes and glanced down at him. In the dim light of the candle, his face was relaxed, at peace.

Although his face still had a touch of the soft tenderness of youth, his features had already matured into striking definition, like natural handsomeness blooming through a haze, but still carrying that deadly freshness and vitality of the young.

Chu Wanning's hand wavered for a split second, and his heart seemed to beat a little faster.

He had no idea what compelled him to call out in a soft voice: "Mo Ran."

"Mm....."

Mo Ran absentmindedly mumbled a reply, and then, as if exhausted, leaned closer and pressed his face against Chu Wanning's waist like he used to do in the past life.

Chu Wanning: "....."

Thump. Thump. Thump.

His heartbeat was rapid in his chest like war drums on a battlefield, the reverberations making him dizzy.

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together; not knowing what else to do, he could only continue to wipe at Mo Ran's hair, steaming away the last droplets of water.

A long while passed like this, then he set the towel down, brushed aside some stray strands of hair from Mo Ran's forehead in passing, and said in a low voice: "All done. You can go sleep now."

Mo Ran opened his eyes, black with a tinge of purple and still a bit dazed, only gradually becoming clearer after a few moments.

Finally breaking out of his daze and noticing that he had gone so far as to give in to habit and lean into Chu Wanning's waist, and, even more unexpectedly, that he actually hadn't been shoved off, Mo Ran was startled to say the least, his eyes opening wide in dumbfounded astonishment, looking just like a dumb dog.

Chu Wanning originally still felt a bit uneasy, but he couldn't help smiling at that look on Mo Ran's face.

Mo Ran saw that he was actually smiling—however lightly, it was definitely a smile—and his eyes became even rounder. He sat up straight, hair a bit of a mess, and suddenly said very seriously: "Shizun, there's a scent on you, it smell really nice."

"....."

He paused, then suddenly furrowed his brows, as if trying hard to remember something. Conternation crept into his expression when he managed to remember it, and he mumbled: "Huh, that's strange, doesn't..... Xia-shidi also smell like this?"

Chu Wanning's expression went rigid immediately.

He flung the towel onto Mo Ran's head before he could react, and physically tossed him off the bed, saying in a cold voice: "I'm tired now, get the hell off and go to sleep."

Mo Ran landed stupidly on his back, caught completely off guard. He lay on the floor in a daze for quite a while before sitting up and rubbing his nose, not mad at all, and then obediently got up to make his bed on the floor.

Author's Notes:

Mini theatre:

Tianwen: What will happen if Xue Meng sleeps in the same room as my owner?

Meatbun: Xue Meng cannot possibly fall asleep, he will be antsy for the whole night, waiting to greet your owner in the morning.

Tianwen: What will happen if Shi Mei sleeps in the same room as my owner?
Meatbun: Mo Ran will wreck the inn.

Tianwen: What will happen if 1.0 Mo Ran sleeps in the same room as my owner?

Meatbun: As the text says.

Tianwen: What will happen if 0.5 Mo Ran sleeps in the same room as my owner?

Meatbun: Do you still need to ask that kind of question? Your owner sleeps on the bed, Mo Ran sleeps on your owner.

Tianwen: What will happen if 2.0 Mo Ran sleeps in the same room as my owner?

Meatbun: Puh, don't think you can make me give away spoilers.

Tianwen: ??? You said I could extract any truth in the world???

Ch.78 This Venerable One's Shizun Has a Nightmare

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran spent the night in the same room. Mo Ran, heedless, fell asleep on the floor in no time, but Chu Wanning's thoughts were restless and erratic, tossing and turning for a long time before finally dozing off into fitful slumber.

His eyes were closed, and he could hear the howling of wind by his ears. Chu Wanning opened his eyes to find himself kneeling in the snow.

.....A dream?

But why did it feel so real, as if he had actually lived through it at some point.

It was the middle of winter, the sky dark and grey and heavy with clouds that stretched to the distant horizons and covered the land. The snow had piled up past the ankle, freezing the very ground itself, and even the thick cloak draped across his shoulders couldn't keep out the wintry bite.

Looking down, he saw a sky blue cloak lined with fur, sewn with intricate patterns in silver thread; it looked familiar somehow, but the feeling slipped away between one moment and the next.

“.....”

Chu Wanning tried to get up, unsure why he was having this kind of harrowing dream, but it was as if his body was not his own—he continued to kneel motionless on the ground, even when snow covered his shoulders and specks of ice stuck to his eyelashes, he still showed no intention of moving.

“Chu-zongshi, it's getting dark, His Majesty surely won't be seeing you today, let's go back.”

The quivery voice of an elderly person came from behind.

The him in the dream didn't turn around, even as footsteps approached, crunching through the snow, and an umbrella appeared above him.

Chu Wanning heard himself say: “Thank you, Liu-gong^[3]. You're getting on in age, so please head back to the pavilion first, I'll be okay here.”

“Zongshi.....”

The elderly voice still wanted to say something, but Chu Wanning said: “Go on.”

The feeble voice sighed and heavy steps walked a few paces away, but then turned back around, and the umbrella reappeared over him.

“This old one will keep Zongshi company.”

Chu Wanning felt his eyes close in the dream, and nothing else was said.

It all seemed so strange, this ridiculous dream of his. The words they uttered were absurd, incomprehensible.

What was all this "His Majesty" and "Liu-gong" nonsense? These phrases of inner palace politics didn't belong in the cultivation world he knew.

He tried to look around at the surroundings of the dream through the lowered lashes of this body. The place looked Sisheng Peak, but some things were different.

The structures were more or less the same, but much more lavishly decorated. The corridors around the courtyard were draped with lilac-colored veils dotted in embroidered stars, and bells carved into the shape of dragons holding pearls dangled from the roofs, clear, crisp jingles dancing faintly through the air whenever a gust of wind blew past.

He was kneeling facing the main hall, where a row of guards, in uniforms that he had never seen before, was stationed in front. He wondered which sect they were from.

The sky gradually darkened, and a line of palace maids, with their hair done up in the traditional style, filed out from a side door to light the standing lamps on either side of the palace gate with fair, slender hands. The lamp was as tall as a person, with nine layers each including forty-nine haitang-shaped lamps hanging from slender copper branches. Candles at the centers of the haitangs glowed brightly, light scattering on the ground like the starry sky from above, illuminating the front of the palace in dazzling radiance.

Finished with her task, the head maid shot Chu Wanning a glare, malice in her voice as she smirked coldly: "It's freezing out here tonight, who are you putting on that pitiful act for? His Majesty and the Empress are currently delighting in the revelries, you can kneel there for as long as you like, no one is going to care."

How impudent!

All his life, no one had ever dared to speak to Chu Wanning like that. He opened his mouth angrily, but although the voice that came out was his own, the words spoken were not.

"I did not mean to interrupt his leisure, but I truly have important matters to discuss. Please inform him."

"Who do you think you are, why should I play messenger for you?" The head maid sneered, "His Majesty and the Empress are quite enjoying themselves right now, who would dare disturb them? You can stay right there if you really want to see His Majesty, maybe he'll spare you a glance in the morning, hmph."

The old servant behind Chu Wanning couldn't take it anymore, saying in a quivery voice: "Yes, His Majesty favors your mistress, but shouldn't you still look at whom it is you're speaking to? Take at least some care in your words?"

"Whom I'm speaking to? Who here at Sisheng Peak doesn't know that His Majesty hates him the most? What need is there to be respectful toward him! Bold of you senile old fool to lecture me!" The head maid's eyes were wide with rage, ordering angrily, "Guards!"

"What do you mean to do!" The feeble old man, back hunched from age, stepped forward to block in front of Chu Wanning.

The palace maid glared at him and said coyly: "Extinguish the fire basins."

"Right away!"

Guards immediately went to the basins in the courtyard and put out the fires burning within.

Chu Wanning thought to himself that the maid had a sharp tongue, but she wasn't dumb after all. With the temperature being this painfully cold, she had no need to argue with them or do anything directly. She only had to put out the fire, and the courtyard would be as an icy cavern, too cold for even the hardiest people to tolerate.

The night grew deeper, music and song drifting without cease from the warmly lit palace.

Chu Wanning was still kneeling. His legs had gone numb long ago.

"Zongshi..... go back....."

The old servant sounded like he was about to sob.

"Please go back, your body can't take this. You know how His Majesty is, if you fall sick from this, he probably won't even send a physician. You have to take care of yourself."

Chu Wanning said softly: "This ruined body is hardly worth anything. I'm willing to die if I can just stop him from attacking Kunlun Palace."

"Zongshi! W-why go to such lengths....."

The Chu Wanning in the dream was already greatly weakened. He coughed a few times, but his eyes were still clear and bright: "Everything that he is today, all of it was my fault. I..... cough cough."

He couldn't finish speaking before being overtaken by an alarmingly violent coughing fit. Chu Wanning covered his mouth with his sleeve, tasting iron in his throat. His hand was covered in blood when he pulled away, crimson against the snow white world.

"Chu-zongshi!"

"I....."

Chu Wanning still wanted to say something, but black washed over his vision and he collapsed into the snow, unable to hold on any longer.

There was a confused racket by his ear, a sudden chaos; but it also seemed so far away, as if separated by layers of fog, oceans apart, and he could barely hear the commotion around him.

Hazily, he heard the old servant yelling in a panic, but could only catch a few scattered words.

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty——please....."

"Chu-zongshi, Chu-zongshi can't hang on much longer, please grant him an audience, this old one will gladly die——"

The disturbance grew and spread; footsteps came from all around, lights turned on.

The melody of instrumentals and the sweet voice of songstresses came to an abrupt stop. The palace gates seem to have been flung open, and there was a gust of warm, fragrant air from the inside. Chu Wanning felt himself being picked up and brought into the warmth of the palace hall. A large hand touched his forehead then immediately flinched away, as if stung.

A low, familiar voice bellowed dangerously.

"Why was this Venerable One not informed?"

No one answered.

The man flew into a rage, and there was a loud crashing sound of something heavy being smashed. He continued to roar, voice booming like thunder inside the hall.

"Are you trying to defy me? He is the master of the Red Lotus Pavilion, this Venerable One's Shizun! And not a single one of you came to notify this Venerable One that he was kneeling outside? *Why was this Venerable One not informed!!!*"

Someone fell to their knees with a thud, trembling all over—it was the head palace maid who was flaunting about earlier.

"This lowly one deserves death, this lowly one saw that Your Majesty and the Empress were in good spirits, and dared not disturb....."

The man paced briskly back and forth a few times, but rather than subsiding, his anger only grew worse. His black robes, trimmed with gold, billowed across the floor like a dark cloud before finally stilling, and his voice was twisted when he spoke again.

"His constitution is poor, can't take the cold. That you made him wait in the snow without informing me, and even..... even put out the fire in the courtyard....."

His voice shook with rage, and he drew in a deep breath before continuing.

The words he spoke next weren't loud, but his tone carried a killing aura that chilled those present to the bone.

"You wanted to kill him."

The maid went pale from fright, her head banging repeatedly against the ground until her entire forehead was blue and purple, voice pitches higher through her trembling lips: "No! No! This lowly one wouldn't dare! Your Majesty! Please have mercy Your Majesty!"

"Take her to the Platform of Sin and Virtue and execute her."

"Your Majesty! Your Majesty——"

The shrill voice scratched along the inside of his ears like blood red nails as the dreamscape began to shake and fall apart under her terrified shrieking, the scene scattering and disintegrating like the drift of snowflakes.

"Do you have any idea how much effort it took this Venerable One to drag him back from the gates of death. Aside from this Venerable One, no one is allowed to hurt so much as a finger on him....."

That hoarse voice was perfectly calm, that very calmness framing the frightening madness beneath.

Chu Wanning felt that person come closer and stop in front of him.

A hand gripped his jaw.

Blearily, he opened his eyes, trying to get a look at that person. Under the bright, dazzling lights, he saw a blurry face with strong, pitch-black brows, a straight nose, and eyes dark like the blackest satin, with a faint tinge of purple in the light of the candle.

".....Mo Ran?"

"Shizun!"

The voice was in sharp definition all of a sudden.

Chu Wanning's eyes flew open; he was still lying in the room at the inn, it was still dark outside, and a lone candle flickered on the table.

Mo Ran was sitting at the edge of the bed with one hand pressed against his forehead and the other braced on the bed, looking at him worriedly.

"What did I....."

He felt all out of sorts; the dream had been far too real, and he couldn't quite break out of his daze for a while.

"You had a nightmare. You were shaking so much." Mo Ran said, tucking him in more, "You looked like you were freezing. I was worried you might be running a fever, but thankfully not."

Chu Wanning uttered a quiet "oh" and turned to look at the slightly opened window. The sky was still dark outside, the night deep still.

"It was snowing in my dream."

He murmured, but said no more.

Chu Wanning sat up, burying his face in one hand and taking a moment to steady himself before exhaling slowly: "Must've been too tired."

"I'll go make some ginger tea for Shizun." Mo Ran looked worriedly at the paleness of his face, "Shizun, you look terrible."

"....."

Chu Wanning didn't respond, so Mo Ran sighed and, without really thinking, instinctively pressed his own forehead against Chu Wanning's cold, sweat-drenched one.

"If you don't say anything, I'll take it as a yes."

Startled by the sudden closeness, Chu Wanning reflexively leaned backward a little: ".....Mn."

Mo Ran, not quite awake, offhandedly stroked his hair like how he used to in the past life before pulling on his outer robe and going downstairs to borrow the kitchen. A little while later, he returned with a wooden tray.

Mo Ran wasn't heartless—Chu Wanning had rushed to the Peach Blossom Springs to save him, and had also gone to great lengths to protect him; no matter how much resentment he held toward this person before, right now, he was grateful.

The tray held a pot of steaming ginger tea and a small jar of brown sugar. He knew that Chu Wanning didn't like things with overly strong flavors, but quite liked sweet foods.

And, besides the ginger tea, he also got a mantou from the kitchen, sliced it into thin pieces, soaked in fresh milk then fried until crispy, and finished with a sprinkling of powdered sugar to make for a plate of simple light snacks.

Color gradually returned to Chu Wanning's face as he held a cup of ginger tea in both hands and sipped slowly from it. He picked up a piece of the sweet crispy mantou between porcelain-white fingertips and contemplated it for a while before asking: "What's this?"

"I just threw something together, it doesn't have a name yet." Mo Ran scratched his head, "Try it, Shizun, it's sweet."

Chu Wanning disliked fried foods, thinks them greasy, but hearing the word "sweet", still held one to his lips and hesitantly took a small bite.

"Mm....."

"Is it good?" Mo Ran asked experimentally.

Chu Wanning glanced at him and said nothing, but picked up another piece to eat with the ginger tea.

The pot of tea and plateful of snacks quickly disappeared, the remnants of the nightmare also dissipating like smoke in this warmth. Chu Wanning yawned and lay back down: "I'm going back to sleep."

"Hang on." Mo Ran lifted his hand to wipe at the corner of Chu Wanning's lips, "You got some crumbs there."

"....."

Looking at that open smile on his face, Chu Wanning's ears felt a little warm despite himself. He turned his face away with a "mn" and paid no more heed to him.

Mo Ran collected the dishes and went downstairs to return them. When he came back, he saw Chu Wanning lying on his side facing the wall, perhaps already asleep.

He walked up and quietly put the curtain down, but Chu Wanning suddenly spoke: "It's cold at night, don't sleep on the floor anymore."

"Then....."

Chu Wanning, with his long eyelashes lowered, really wanted him to stay, but the words "sleep up here" just wouldn't come out, even as the tips of his ears kept getting warmer and warmer.

He cared for him and so didn't want him to sleep on the floor, but he also liked him and didn't want him to leave.

But his face was so thin, and he well knew that even if he did manage to get the words out, he will surely just be rejected, and then both his dignity and his veneer will be forfeit; even just thinking about it made him feel pathetic.

Things were so much easier as Xia Sini; little ones were allowed to be a little willful.

—But Mo Ran had been good to him today, even remembering that he liked a lot of brown sugar in his ginger tea. Was it okay for him to think that, maybe, Mo Ran actually does care for him a little bit.....

The thought made Chu Wanning's chest warm, and he blurted it out in a moment of hotheadedness.

"Come sleep up here."

"I'll go see if they're done yet, and go back to my own room if so."

They spoke at practically the same time, and Mo Ran didn't fully process Chu Wanning's words until after he had already finished speaking. His eyes widened slightly when he did.

"Sounds good."

Chu Wanning concurred instantly, as if rushing to cover up what he had just said.

"Go on."

"Shizun, you....."

"I'm tired, you can leave."

".....Alright. Rest well, Shizun."

He left, the door creaking open and then shut.

In the darkness, Chu Wanning opened his eyes. His heart raced in his chest, and his palms were covered with sweat, humiliated by his loss of self control just

now.

He really had been alone for too long, to mistake just a tiny bit of kindness and care from someone else as sincere tenderness.

Like an idiot.

Irritated, he turned over and buried his face into the pillow, sinking into a bottomless self-loathing. He was well aware that Mo Ran liked Shi Mingjing, that there was nothing between them but the distant politeness of master and disciple, yet.....

That person from the dream appeared unbidden in his mind.

The same exact face, only older.

The way he had looked at him with a surly expression and eyes too deep to read.

The door opened again with a creak.

Chu Wanning froze immediately, his entire back going stiff, like a bow stretched taut.

Someone came over to the bed. There was a moment of silence, then he felt that person sit down at the edge, bringing with him the light scent of freshly laundered clothes.

"Shizun, are you asleep?"

No response.

So Mo Ran continued, voice even like he was discussing the weather: "They're still at it." He chuckled softly and lay down next to Chu Wanning with his head propped up on one arm, gaze sweeping over the other person's back as it very obviously and visibly tenses several degrees more.

"Is Shizun's offer from earlier still open?"

"....."

"Shizun sure likes to ignore people. If Shizun doesn't say anything, I'll just take it as a yes again."

".....Hmph."

Mo Ran's eyes curved into little crescents, black-purple and flickering with amusement at the cold hmph that came from the other side of the bed.

If doting on Shi Mei was his habit, then teasing Shizun was a game he never tired of.

He never could figure out just what it was he felt toward Chu Wanning; all he knew was that this person made his heart itch, made him want to bare his fangs and bite him until he either starts crying or starts laughing——although it was just wishful thinking for the most part.

But whenever that face, ever cold and impassive, showed some slightest bit of emotion because of him, Mo Ran would get fervently excited.

"Shizun."

"Mn."

"Nothing, just felt like calling you."

"....."

"Shizun."

"Out with it if you have something to say, shut up if not."

"Hahaha." Mo Ran laughed, then suddenly thought of something and asked, half joking half serious, "I was just thinking, but Xia-shidi and Shizun really are far too alike. Shizun, is he your son?"

"....."

Chu Wanning had gone through far too much emotional turmoil for one night, and was in a sulky mood. To suddenly have Mo Ran make fun of him like this, he couldn't help feeling irritated.

"Pfft, I was just messing with Shizun, don't min——"

"Yes." Chu Wanning answered coolly, "He's my son."

Mo Ran was still grinning: "Oh, that's what I figured, so he's your son—— WAIT!! SON???!?!"

His eyes flew wide open as if he'd been struck by lightning, mouth hanging open in disbelief.

"S-S-S-S——SON?"

"Mn." Chu Wanning rolled over and pinned Mo Ran with a deadpan gaze, his face deadly serious and without the slightest hint of jest.

He had blundered too much tonight, and worried that his facade might not hold. Since Mo Ran wanted to make this joke, he might as well take the chance to muddy the waters, whatever it takes to make sure Mo Ran doesn't find out that he likes him.

Thinking so, Chu Wanning calmly picked up the pieces of his dignity that he had dropped earlier, and said with all seriousness: "Xia Sini is my illegitimate child, even he himself doesn't know about this. As of right now, this is a secret known by the heaven, the earth, you, and me. If ever a third person were to find out, I will absolutely end you."

Mo Ran: "....."

Author's Notes:

Meh QAQz It's so cold of late, don't catch a cold, comrades.
So let's look at how everyone keeps warm~

0.5 Mo Ran: Chu Wanning, come here and let this venerable one hug you for a while.

Chu Wanning: Don't you have a queen?

0.5 Mo Ran: Men, drag the queen away and fry her alive.

Chu Wanning: ...

0.5 Mo Ran: It's only you now, come here and warm this venerable one up.

Chu Wanning: Cold-blooded demon, scram!

1.0 Mo Ran: It's so cold, I want to be warm, why is no one looking after me... I'll drink more hot water, then.

2.0 Mo Ran: It's nothing, I can bear it.

Xue Meng: Cold? Nothing of the sort, I'm young and virile.

Shi Mei: It's so cold...you should wear more layers, Young Master and A-Ran
huff...

Chu Wanning: [This person is extremely afraid of the cold, and is hiding in his blankets, refusing to come out]Whoever said that the lower cultivation realm provided warmth is a shameless liar!

Ch.79 This Venerable One's Shizun Is an Actor

If he didn't know Chu Wanning like the back of his hand, Mo Ran was afraid that he really might have been fooled by his serious demeanor and believed that nonsense.

Xia Sini was Chu Wanning's son?
Yeah right, he'd have to be dumb to fall for that!

But it's not like he could just brush Shizun off. So in the days that followed, he simply played along with it, putting on a show like "oh gods" "so that's how it is" "I can't believe Shizun is actually a playboy" and other such.

He had to admit that it was an interesting time, even though he had no idea what Chu Wanning was up to.

So Mo Ran made a sport of it, poking playfully at Chu Wanning every so often. Like that time when they were stopping at a teahouse for a snack, and Mo Ran, cheek in hand, eyes bright and round, had clamored: "Shizun Shizun."

Chu Wanning swallowed his tea before lifting his eyelashes to look evenly at him: "Mn?"

"Why won't you acknowledge Xia-shidi as your child?"

Chu Wanning replied: "It's not that I won't acknowledge him, it just isn't the right time yet."

"Then when will it be the right time?"

"That will depend on him."

He had such an air of profoundness about him that Mo Ran's ribs hurt from holding in his laughter, even as he forced himself to put on his best pitying act: "Poor Xia-shidi."

Or that other time, as they were travelling side by side on horseback, when Mo Ran had reached up and snapped a willow branch while passing by. He was fresh out of distractions and bored out of his mind, so he clamored for Chu Wanning again.

"Shizun Shizun."

"What is it?"

"Can I ask you something?" Mo Ran was all smiles, "About Shiniang [Shizun's wife]..... what kind of person is she? Is she pretty?"

Chu Wanning choked, then hastily cleared his throat to cover it up.
"She's alright."

"Eh? Just alright?" Mo Ran was shocked, "I was so sure that someone who could catch Shizun's eye would be devastatingly beautiful."

“.....”

Mo Ran steered his black horse closer to Chu Wanning's white one, and asked slyly: “Is Shizun still keeping in touch with Shiniang?”

“.....Keep in touch how?” Chu Wanning threw him a cold look and said darkly, “Your Shiniang is dead.”

They've barely just started and he's already offed his own wife? Mo Ran almost choked on spit: “D-dead?How did she die?”

Chu Wanning, expressionlessly: “Birth complications.”

“.....” Pfft hahahahaha.

If the situation wasn't like this, Mo Ran probably would've fallen off his horse from laughing too hard.

Of course Mo Ran wouldn't just let such an amusing subject go. The next day, he washed a pouchful of fresh, plump cherries before setting off, to entice Chu Wanning into talking with him some more on the way.

“Shizun, can I know who Shiniang was? What was her name?”

Chu Wanning picked up a cherry and ate it with no discernible reaction, then said coldly: “She's already passed, what's the use in knowing her name.”

Mo Ran didn't miss a beat: “The sect leader has always taught us to be filial. Even if Shiniang is no longer with us, I, as an disciple, should still remember her name, and go to pay my respects every Winter Solstice and QingMing.”

Chu Wanning kept eating his cherries, replying evenly: “No need. Your Shiniang wasn't a worldly person like that, and she never cared for the smell of incense.”

Mo Ran pursed his lips, rolling his eyes on the inside: *it's obvious that you just couldn't make up a backstory for Shiniang on the fly, can't believe you'd just say she's unaffected and beyond common concerns with such a serious face.* But he kept smiling on the outside: “For Shiniang to be so refined, she must have been a cultivator too?”

Chu Wanning paused, then picked up another cherry between snow-white fingertips and ate it at his leisure before answering: “Correct.”

Mo Ran blinked curiously: “Which sect was she from?”

Chu Wanning estimated Xia Sini's age and quickly calculated in his head that he would've still been at LinYi at the time, so he said evenly: “Rufeng Sect.”

“Oh.....” Mo Ran's eyebrows went up slightly. Chu Wanning caught a loophole with that one—Rufeng Sect had always favored their male disciples; although the female disciples received the same teachings, they were never allowed the same opportunities to stand out and make a name for themselves. In fact, they never even left their names when out on missions, so even though the female cultivators of Rufeng Sect were no less accomplished, they were only known as “female cultivators of Rufeng Sect” out in the world, and none knew of their individual names. So Chu Wanning could make up whatever he felt like, and there would be absolutely no way to check.

But Mo Ran wasn't one to just give up. He perked back up and persisted: “Then when did Shizun and Shiniang meet? How did you two meet?”

“Er.....”

Chu Wanning hesitated, not quite up to the task of making all that up on the spot, when his gaze fell on Mo Ran's bright sparkly eyes, and he suddenly realized that he didn't have to answer the question at all. He immediately pressed his lips together and, with a sweep of his sleeve, said coldly, "What are you doing prying into this master's personal matters?"

With that, he urged his horse on, white robes disappearing into the distance and leaving Mo Ran in the dust.

The two of them roamed around for a couple of weeks, visiting the markets at numerous smaller sects and checking at every stall selling weapons and spiritual stones, but found absolutely nothing of note.

On this particular day, after Chu Wanning finished exchanging notes with Xue Zhengyong via haitang message, he and Mo Ran set off from the inn and headed toward the market at Guyue'ye to continue their investigation.

Guyue'ye was the foremost medicinal sect of the world, and the sect that Xue Meng's mother, Madam Wang, came from.

This sect was built on an island named "Rainbell^[4] Isle"; it wasn't an actual island, but rather the back of an enormous tortoise. The tortoise was thousands of thousands years old and bound to the founder of the sect by blood pact, carrying the entire sect on its back as it travelled the oceans and nourishing the flora of the isle with its unique spiritual energy.

The disciples of Guyue'ye have always been enigmatic and removed from the world. The sect rarely ever interacted with the outside; only on the first and fifteenth of each month would the tortoise dock at the YangZhou port so that other sects could board and purchase medicines, and merchants could peddle their weapons, spiritual stones, and other wares that aren't usually found on the island itself.

Yet the most famous attraction on Rainbell Isle wasn't Guyue'ye, but "Xuanyuan^[5] Pavilion." Xuanyuan Pavilion was a subsidiary of Guyue'ye, and a well-known trading post.

They opened their doors twice per month, auctioning goods like Guyue'ye's top-grade medicines and rare treasures from various sellers. The merchandise often toed the line of permissibility in terms of the cultivation world's taboos, but no one was so bored as to make an enemy of Guyue'ye—after all, most of the medicines out there came from this sect. All things considered, Guyue'ye was no less powerful than the leading Rufeng Sect.

"Put your hood on, too many eyes here."

More and more people were arriving at Rainbell Isle. Chu Wanning quietly reminded Mo Ran while tugging the hood of his own cloak lower.

Xuanyuan Pavilion's auction house had lavish private rooms for each of the great sects as a show of respect, but since this was where shady deals went down and stolen goods exchanged hands, cultivators generally kept their identities hidden so as to not attract any undue attentions or fatal misfortunes.

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning stepped into Xuanyuan Pavilion. The inside was split into three floors, with the center of the first floor occupied by a platform of white jade, shaped like a nine-petaled lotus flower and shrouded by nine layers of impenetrable defensive barriers—this was where the merchandise is displayed during auction.

With the white jade platform as center and extending into the four cardinal directions were rows of redwood benches, several hundred in all. These were the standard seats.

The second floor were private booths, each with a large window made of golden cedar and a curtain of silver moon silk that allowed those inside to see the outside clearly, but blocked sight from the outside in. These booths protected

the privacy of the guests, but they were expensive—nine thousand gold per two hours.

Chu Wanning disliked crowding along with others, so he took out the gold pieces Xue Zhengyong had sent and didn't even hesitate.

The servants of Xuanyuan Pavilion that attended to the guests all had death pacts with the master of the pavilion, and would never leak any of the guests' personal information. But even so, Chu Wanning remained wary. He booked the booth with the best view and had the servant bring two pots of snowy fragrance tea, eight pieces each of fresh and candied fruit, four pastries and four sweets, and then sent the servant away.

With only Mo Ran and himself left in the room, Chu Wanning finally lowered his hood as he stood by the window looking down at the masses of people below.

"According to the sect leader, Xuanyuan is going to be auctioning off a weapon named Guilai [To Return]."

"Guilai?" Mo Ran shook his head, "Never heard of it."

"It's a holy weapon."

Mo Ran started: "A holy weapon? But didn't Jincheng Lake already——"

"I know. But supposedly this Guilai was found in a nameless grave at the Jun Mountain. Its master probably didn't have any heirs to pass it to, and so had it buried with him."

".....I see."

But a holy weapon took as master only the one who named it, and, upon his death, would then accept his heirs. Even if someone else were to get their hands on the holy weapon, they wouldn't be able to draw out even a tiny fraction of its true power. As far as Mo Ran was concerned, there wasn't much point to buying a weapon like that.

Seeing through his thoughts, Chu Wanning said: "It's true that a holy weapon that does not acknowledge its user as master will not display its true power, but even then, it's still many times stronger than normal weapons. These people will definitely go all out."

Mo Ran grasped the situation: "I understand Shizun's meaning now. Most people go their whole lives without even seeing a holy weapon. Since this 'Guilai' was found in a nameless grave, and an ages old one at that, everyone here will more likely than not draw out their own spiritual energy to test it, on the off chance they happen to be a descendent of its original master. There's no harm to trying, after all."

"Precisely."

Mo Ran continued contemplatively: "Holy weapons are rarely even seen, but one without a master just so happens to pop up for sale right at this juncture? No matter how you look at it, this has got to be that fake Gouchen's work, bringing out a high quality fake to bait everyone into release their spiritual energies so that he can see if anyone here has the spiritual essence he's looking for."

Chu Wanning sat down in a cushioned chair, poured himself a cup of snowy fragrance, and leisurely drank it. Then he looked at the swarm of people below and said in a quiet voice: "It's exactly as you said. But regardless of whether the holy weapon is real or whether it's part of the fake Gouchen's scheme, it can't hurt to check it out."

Just then, there was a ruckus down below.

Chu Wanning and Mo Ran peered downwards, and were both a little bewildered——

Xuanyuan Pavilion's golden gates stood wide open, and two rows of blue-robed young men with their hair done up in jade crowns were striding openly through the crowd of cloaked cultivators with their faces hidden under hoods. The one in the lead was slender and handsome, not bothering with any form of concealment as he strolled right into the black market.

Mo Ran uttered, surprised: "Ye Wangxi?"

Author's Notes:

Mini-theatre <Welcome to Sothesby's, what is the one thing each one of you gentlemen most wish will appear on the auction?>

Mo Ran: Potion that can make people stop dreaming.

Chu Wanning: I don't have anything much that I want, but I heard that the neighbour of our neighbour has a famous ancient sabre of black iron that Xue Meng can use as a holy weapon, so make it the ancient iron sabre. (Alright, we know you're Zhang Qiling* in the wrong novel, next.)

*A main character in 盗墓笔记 The Lost Tomb, whose weapon is an iron sabre.

Xue Meng: Ancient black iron sabre. (Zhang Qiling, are you going to leave!!)

Shi Mei: Black...

Meatbun: Shut up!!

Shi Mei: Black wok stain remover, I wasn't done talking.

Meatbun: ...Oh.

Mei Hanxue: Are beauties for sale? Since the olden times, the black market has always sold beauties of all kinds, I want all the exquisite ones, so I can bring them back to the palace as ornaments on display.

Ye Wangxi (kicking the door down):All against the wall, and squat down. Police.

[1] A gesture indicating gladness

[2] 凌迟 a form of punishment in which a person is sliced alive, piece by piece; indicates similar cruelty in the case of this fruit, but not what the fruit is actually doing

[3] 公公 gonggong, suffix -公 gong, is a court eunuch

[4] 霖 Lin rain, 铃 Ling bell

[5] 轩辕 Xuanyuan name of the Yellow Emperor, a legendary sovereign

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun
Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.80 This Venerable One's Ex-Wife... Has Come

The one who had come was the modest gentleman who shared the same residence with Mo Ran back at the Peach Blossom Springs Ye Wangxi.

Today, he had come donned in the heron mantle with blue underlinings and silver silk threads of the Rufeng sect, his hair fastened with a royal blue ribbon, and adorned around his waist was a silver fragrance pouch embroidered of a rare beast with a pearl in its mouth. Perhaps it was because the armour was removed, so while the strong aura of valiance still rested between his brows, there were traces of an elegant air.

Xuanyuan Pavilion's Grand Manager approached in greeting, his eyes lowered and his head inclined, "Ye-xianjun."

Ye Wangxi nodded and said, "I've come in my sworn father's name to bid for an item. Will the Grand Master please lead me up the pavilion."

"The Pavilion Master had already known xianjun was coming, and a booth was already reserved for the Rufeng sect. I will lead my lord up straight away."

Ye Wangxi then led the ten something disciples of the Rufeng sect upstairs, leaving behind an entire hall of hooded crowd whispering to themselves.

"Have people of Rufeng also come today?"

"Who's that xianjun? How come we've never seen him before..."

Obviously there's a reason why none of you had seen him before, Mo Ran thought, but couldn't help but be curious too, and watched as Ye Wangxi's back disappeared around the corner before he turned to Chu Wanning, "Shizun, you've sayed with the Rufeng sect before, do you know this Ye-xianjun?"

"No." Chu Wanning knitted his brows slightly, "But for some reason he looks rather familiar..." He paused a bit, closed his eyes to think, but still shook his head, "I don't recall anything."

Mo Ran scratched his head, "This Ye-xianjun stayed in the same residence as me back at the Peach Blossoms Springs. His ability isn't bad. Now that he's come on behalf of the Rufeng sect to bid for things, I imagine his status within the sect can't be too low either, but Shizun actually doesn't know him?"

"There are seventy-two city fortresses within the Rufeng sect, personnel are spread far and wide. I don't like to run around, and am too lazy to pry into internal affairs, so it's not strange that I don't know him."

The two were just conversing when the candlelight within the booth reserved for the Rufeng sect was lit up in a bright yellow glow, no doubt it was Ye Wangxi and company who had already entered and settled in their seats. The highest level of this Xuanyuan Pavilion was especially reserved for the great sects, so normally it was very seldom used. Thus, the crowd looked up to see, thinking it a rather rare event.

Now that the Rufeng sect had joined, everyone's anticipation for this auction instantly increased by a few notches. After a pot of tea time, the white jaded lotus platform in the centre suddenly brightened immensely, and from the ceiling of Xuanyuan Pavilion, a vibrant and brilliant red satin roll was dropped. A dainty young girl of eleven or twelve in bare feet donned in a snow-white shark muslin,

caught the satin and spun and landed lightly and delicately onto the ice-cold white jaded lotus platform.

"Thank you for waiting, honored xianjuns. I am the Second Pavilion Master in Command." That clever and handsome little girl smiled demurely, "Honored xianjuns have come from all over the four seas in praise of our name. Naturally, the Xuanyuan Pavilion will, as always, return our gratitude with the rarest and best of items to show for everyone."

Mo Ran's hearing was excellent, and heard down below there were people griping, "The Second Pavilion Master of Xuanyuan Pavilion is actually an immature, underaged little girl?"

"Aiyoh, buddy you really haven't seen much. Do you know how old this 'little girl' is?"

"Ten? Fifteen? She can't be more than twenty?"

"Heh, stunned, are you? She's over a hundred now, you should call her Great Granny, not 'little girl'."

"What?! Liu-xiong, you're pulling my leg here? How can that little thing be a hundred!"

"This is Guyue'ye, the number one medicine sect of the world, how is anything impossible? It's just some medicine of everlasting youth."

"Whoa—"

This must've been the first time that man who was wowing in awe had come, and after that conversation, he excitedly stretched out his neck, his hands clutching the wallet pouch on his person, obviously impatient to see just what kind of miraculous medicine and sacred tools Xuanyuan Pavilion would bring out for the auction.

The Second Pavilion Master didn't disappoint either, and with a snap of her fingers, a gap cracked open at the centre of the stone lotus, and a small podium the shape of a bulb slowly rose up. Upon it rested five silk brocade boxes the size of a palm, and each box was opened wide generously, revealing the medicinal pills with the shine of pearls.

Immediately, someone called out with a laugh, "Isn't that the Pill of Obsessive Affection? What's so rare about that?"

"It is indeed, but even if the first one out isn't going to be some rare treasure, you can't just bring some love pills out to make up the numbers."

The Second Pavilion Master heard the people's gripes but wasn't irritated in the least, and instead she smiled with crescent eyes, speaking loudly and clearly, "Everyone certainly has good eyes. This is indeed the Pill of Obsessive Affection. But everyone knows that while these pills are hard to refine, they aren't anything exotic. Our Xuanyuan Pavilion will naturally never bring any ordinary items out to placate our customers."

As she spoke, she took one of the brocade boxes and presented it in her hand, *clack*, and closed the box.

Although the crowd was seated at various distances, there was a spiritual mirror prepared in front of each individual that could show the treasure's details without fault. Only then did everyone notice the snake markings on the cover of the box.

"Hanlin^[1] the Sage?!" Someone sucked in a breath.

The Second Pavilion Master smiled, "That's right. These five Pills of Obsessive-Affection, each box has come from the refinery kiln of the elder of my sect——Hanlin the Sage. Regular Pill of Obsessive Affection can confound the heart, and have the user become obsessed with oneself, but the effect only lasts for half a year, and it's very easy to produce an antidote for it. But these five pills..." Her delicate, tender fingertips held the brocade box and explained solemnly, "These can guarantee for ten years, without any antidote to cure."

"WHAT?"

"My heavens, how is that possible..."

"Hanlin the Sage really is too frightening..."

The Second Pavilion Master waited until the commotion died down somewhat before she smiled again, "In order to differentiate from ordinary Pills of Obsessive Affection, Hanlin the Sage has named these Love Pills. With the purchase of only one of these pills, dissolve it in water and convince the other party to drink it, in the span of ten years, we guarantee the other party will remain obsessed with you without any wavering."

A female cultivator asked with a high voice down below, "Is there really no cure for it after taking the pill? If in ten years I don't like him anymore, wouldn't he still harass me?"

The crowd started chuckling and laughing, and the Second Pavilion Master also smiled politely, "My lady has pointed out a truth, which is why the Xuanyuan Pavilion will take this chance to remind everyone that the Love Pill has no cure in the world, and until the ten years is up, there is nothing that can break the bond. If it isn't a case of unanswered tormented love, we recommend not to feed the other party the pill."

With that conclusion, the bidding started, and the price started rising. Mo Ran saw that the ones screaming to fight the prices were mostly female cultivators, and he subconsciously clicked his tongue.

"This is really too scary."

"Indeed. To earn sentiments thus truly is too tasteless."

Having heard Chu Wanning's response, Mo Ran turned his head around and glanced at him, smiling, "Shizun you'll have to watch out. You're so good looking, who knows if there are women cultivators from ShiSeng Peak here who'd buy this and secretly drop this in your water to have you fall in love with them. You're a married man, there's no way you can be affectionate with another."

"....."

This man said this to ridicule him, and Chu Wanning wanted to be angry, but this was the first time in his life that he heard Mo Ran call him good looking, so he couldn't find it in himself to be angry. His lips pressed into a cool and distant straight line, turning his head away, not wanting to acknowledge him.

"But if the other party really does take the pill, they must fall tragically in love, huh." Mo Ran mumbled, and seeing how fast those five boxes of pills were purchased, he sighed, and shook his head, "How sad."

Chu Wanning stared at that snow-white wall for a moment, then replied calmly, "If they truly loved the other, how could they actually have the heart to use a pill like that. You're still young. There are some things you don't understand."

Still young?

Mo Ran twisted around, his dimples deepening with his smile, "I don't understand, but Shizun does? Is Shizun going to tell me about Shizun's wife?"

"Get the hell out"

"Hahahahaha."

In between playing around, the second item had been presented on the platform.

"Tapir Fragrance Dew." The Second Pavilion Master introduced crisply, "Also from the kiln of Hanling the Sage. This is the newest medicinal dew refined by Hanlin. The first generation of disciples of Guyue'ye have tried it, and it works magic."

Cultivator A was somewhat learned, "Typing Fragrance Dew?"

Cultivator B was a little hungry, "Tapas Fragrance Dew?"

Cultivator C was perverted, "Tapping Fragrance Dew?"

Chu Wanning gave it a ponder, and raised his trembling lashes, gazing over to those five porcelain bottles, "Tapir Fragrance Dew... from the Dream-Consuming Tapir?"

The Second Pavilion Master didn't have the intention to lose people's interest, and seeing how the crowd was confused, she immediately explained with a smile, "The reason it's called the Tapir Fragrance Dew is because the formula has the claw blood of Dream Tapirs. With only a drop in a cup of tea, the effect will last for seven days, and every night is guaranteed a good dream. This may not mean much to ordinary cultivators, but with the influence of cultivation methods and spells, some xianjun experiences relentless nightmares and trouble with peaceful slumber. If the problem persists it can lead to qi deviation, which is why this Tapir Fragrance Dew is the uttermost best choice."

After Chu Wanning heard, he was suddenly reminded of that realistic dream he had, and while it wasn't a nightmare, it did indeed make him feel rather unsettled...

The Second Pavilion Master was still pushing her medicine with all she had, "Besides that, the Tapir Fragrance Dew also has the ability to manage spiritual energy, and aid in cultivation."

Chu Wanning was still deep in thought, untouched by it.

"If there are any children training at home, the Tapir Fragrance Dew is also extremely beneficial for them. Hanlin the Sage had the foresight that there might be elders and teachers purchasing for young trainees, and specially made the five bottles of Tapir Fragrance Dews into five different flavours. The red bottle is lychee flavour, the yellow bottle is orange flavour, the white bottle is milk candy flavour, the purple bottle is grape flavour, and the black bottle is mulberry flavour. Also, with but one sip, the taste will remain on the lips and tongue for an entire day, quite lovely."

Just as she finished, a silver stick was dropped from the dignitary seat from the second floor.

Since the second and third floors were much further away and it was inconvenient to yell to bid for prices, they would write their price on a silver stick before tossing it down. Those silver sticks were cast with a spell, and would float to the Pavilion Master without fault.

The Second Pavilion Master caught the stick that came drifting, and gave it a glance, "....."

Right at the same time, within the dignitary booth, Chu Wanning casually laid down the brush he had just used, and leisurely drank tea. Mo Ran watched from the side, and his lips couldn't help but twitch.

The voice of the Second Pavilion Master rang from below, "From the Tian dignitary seat of the second floor, five hundred thousand gold. Is anyone going to bid higher?"

The moment the words were out, the crowd started chattering.

This Tapir Fragrance Dew might be good, but it obviously wasn't as popular as the Love Pill earlier. Five boxes of Love Pills went for three hundred thousand gold altogether, so asking for five hundred thousand gold for these five bottles of dew was already considerably high.

"Probably be the parents of some little gongzi who's buying." Someone grumbled.

"Must be for some rich little gongzi's training."

There were cultivators in the crowd who had suffered enough of qi deviation, and hardened themselves, "I'll take all five. I bid for five hundred and fifty thousand gold."

"The Tapir Fragrance Dew, the price now is five hundred and fifty thousand, is there anyone——"

Before the Second Pavilion Master even finished, another silver stick came errantly floating down the air, again tossed from the Tian dignitary seat on the second floor. She glanced at it, and her eyes widened unwittingly.

"I apologize, everyone. I understood it incorrectly the first time, so I will rectify my mistake now. Earlier, what the customer from the second floor had meant was, he would be paying five hundred thousand per bottle, for a total of two million and five hundred thousand..."

Only a fool would fight Chu Wanning at that price point. As Mo Ran watched those five bottles of Tapir Fragrance Dews being delivered into the room, he felt his entire person feeling bad.

Chu Wanning spent two million and five hundred thousand.....
On sweets.....

Sensing Mo Ran's incredulous look, Chu Wanning asked indifferently, "What is it?"

"Ahaha, nothing, I just didn't think Shizun would like something like this."

"Why would I like children's things." Chu Wanning replied calmly, "I bought it for Xia Sini."

"....."

What an act.

Mo Ran's brows twitched. Let's see how much longer you can keep this up.

The auctioned items continued to be presented one by one, and while everything afterwards were also unique spiritual medicine and treasures, they held no value for both Mo Ran and Chu Wanning. The two sipped on tea as they waited for the holy weapon 'Guilai' to appear.

Mo Ran leaned by the window, his black shirt wrapped tightly around his thin waist, making his shoulders look broader and his legs longer. He glanced down at the lively event down below, then looked up to gaze at the reserved Rufeng booth upstairs.

"By the way, Shizun, how did uncle settle the affair at the Peach Blossoms Springs? You never told me the details."

"It's not really settled. This affair can't get bigger than it is lest we alert the enemy. Even though the Sect Leader knew the truth he couldn't make a big deal of it, but he did end things completely with the feathered tribe and brought both Shi Mei and Xue Meng back to Shisheng Peak. The fight was severe at the time, and the disciples of several sects all saw. Some thought the Peach Blossoms Springs weren't reliable and had already left. I imagine this Ye Wangxi is the same." Chu Wanning finished an orange osmanthus cake and reached for a second one, "The Sect Leader told the outside world that you caused trouble, and currently shut in Sisheng Peak in reflection, so this could hide your tracks for a while at least."

Mo Ran scratched his head, "Sounds like quite the mess, I've really troubled uncle..."

Just as he was grumbling, the Pavilion Master of the Xuanyuan Pavilion standing upon the nine-petaled lotus platform suddenly used an amplification spell to clear her throat, and the sonorous and pleasant voice instantly echoed throughout every nook and cranny.

"The next auction number is a rare treasure of the highest grade, extremely hard to come by, and is considered within the top ten in our auction guide of the past three years."

With only those words, silence fell.

After a moment, the crowd was like splashing a spoon of clear water into a pot of boiling oil, and instantly everything exploded. Almost everyone's eyes were glinting, and they whispered excitedly to each other.

To be able to rank in the top ten among the items auctioned off at Xuanyuan Pavilion in the past three years, just what grade of a treasure could this be? For something like this, nevermind buying, to a lot of people, a simple glance of such a thing with their own eyes was already an extreme good luck. The buyers were becoming more and more excited, and the air was so tense it was almost tangible.

The people down below were stretching their necks to look, and those in the booths also lifted the blinds. All eyes were on the lotus platform.

Mo Ran wondered in a soft voice, "Is it the holy weapon Guilai?"

Chu Wanning didn't speak.

Along with the gap at the centre of the platform cracking open once more, the clear voice of the Second Pavilion Master of Xuanyuan Pavilion echoed.

"Presenting the next treasured item, the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast."

"What?!"

Mo Ran was stunned, his hands gripping the window sill, "It's not a holy weapon?!"

Chu Wanning hadn't expected this either, and he rose to his feet abruptly, coming to Mo Ran's side, looking down the building with him. From within the centre of the lotus platform slowly rose a stone divan, and crisscrossing upon the divan were eight iron imprisonment chains as thick as arms, locking a living creature that was struggling unceasingly. However, that living creature was completely covered by a wool blanket, and it was hard to see what it was underneath with a first look.

But that didn't affect the boiling excitement in the least.

"The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast", no matter its class or appearance, was already in itself a renowned name in the world.

Legends said during the HongMeng Period in history, before the heavens and the earth were separated, the demon clans and the human clans both lived upon the cultivation continent. At the time, there was a branch of demons called the "Butterfly-Boned clan". Their martial might was weak, but their bodies contained an immense amount of spiritual energy. To consume the blood and flesh of the Butterfly-Boned clan, or to engage in intercourse with them, could both greatly enhance a human's cultivation. Those without a spiritual foundation could instantly have one form, and those who did have one could enter zongshi level directly. And it was precisely because of this that during the beginning of World Chaos, they suffered the tragedy of clan extermination. They were either captured to be bed slaves, or they were directly killed for their flesh and blood to be devoured.

Presently, the real Butterfly-Boned clan had long since been eradicated from the world, but among the vastness of people, there would still be descendants in whose veins flowed the blood of the Butterfly-Boned clan. The blood of the majority of them possessed zero effects, and were no different than ordinary cultivators. However, there were also a very small number of those who'd show signs of returning to their ancestral ways. The blood and flesh of those people weren't as strong in effect as their ancestors had been during the HongHuang Period, but they could still greatly enhance a cultivator's ability.

These people were called "Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts", and this 'feast' had two meanings.

A feast in bed, or a feast of the flesh.

Meaning they could be placed by the pillowside to be mated, or eaten directly. Whether it was the former or the latter was entirely dependent on the buyer.

Someone of the Butterfly-Boned clan with ancestral characteristics weren't seen as 'human' in the cultivation world. Even though they were no different than ordinary people, out of personal greed, the cultivation world had deemed them to be 'merchandise'. Thus, while selling Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast was a horrifying ordeal, it did not violate any taboos.

It's just, a just and dignified zongshi like Chu Wanning didn't look pleased in the least.

"This Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast was not obtained by Guyue'ye. This is an entrusted sale, thus the Xuanyuan Pavilion will be taking thirty percent of the agreed transaction payment as commission. Will the honored xianjuns keep a clear account when bidding, and bid within your ability."

Once the Second Pavilion Master had spoken, she snapped her fingers crisply, and the wool blanket covering the divan fell with the signal.

Abrupt silence blanketed the pavilion.

Everyone was staring at the body chained upon the stone divan with such focus, even breathing and heartbeats could almost be heard within the large Xuanyuan Pavilion.

It was a young girl of a delicate, satin body, skin as white as snow. Long locks like silk draped down her naked body, and she was wrapped in only a see-through silk tulle, her full and smooth bare body was trembling, like frozen fresh snow, dampened jade, she glowed gently under the light.

Eight iron chains firmly restrained her delicate body, and clanged along with her struggling, which only easily aroused the men's savage desires. Even heartbreakers who had seen endless numbers of people would admit without hesitation that this girl was a unique, fine piece of work.

"A supreme treasure of the highest grade. A female Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast at her ripening age." The Second Pavilion Master smiled, then approached to release one of the chains. Before that girl could fight back her hand was caught as fast as lightning, and raised to the air, "Hanlin the Sage had marked her arm with a dot of chastity cinnabar. Will everyone see clearly. She is still a virgin."

A snow white cloth was bound around the girl's mouth, her pitiful cries muffled, and only large beads of tears rolled down from the corners of her eyes, those golden tears confirming her identity as a Butterfly-Boned clan who maintained ancestral traits.

Some were sucking in their breaths, some were swallowing hungrily, an atmosphere such as this suddenly made Xuanyuan Pavilion not an establishment filled with cultivators, but a house squeezed full of starving wolves with drool coming from the corner of their mouths as they greedily eyed their prey.

PA!

Chu Wanning's cool gaze withdrew and landed on Mo Ran. Mo ran's face was blanched, his nails digging into the wood. He had actually broken a corner of the window sill with his grip.

"What's wrong?"

"No, ...Nothing." Mo Ran inhaled deeply before he managed to calm himself, and shook his head at Chu Wanning, "I just think selling live humans like this is... very disgusting."

He wasn't telling the truth.

His eyes quietly returned to the form of that Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast.

This woman was the number one beauty of the cultivation world he had taken for a wife after he had titled himself emperor in the previous life——
Song Qiutong!

Author's Notes:

Ye Wangxi

Courtesy name: None

Nickname: None

Occupation: The last disciple of Rufeng Sect's First Elder

To put it simply: Raised by his stepfather

Social Appearance: The sect leader's right-hand man, a reliable Rufeng gentleman

To put it simply: A lackey.

Current favourite: The young master of Rufeng Sect

Favourite food: Grilled fish

Dislike: Cowards

Height: 176cm

Ch.81 This Venerable One's Bu'gui!

Meanwhile, in Rufeng Sect's private room on the third floor, Ye Wangxi stood tall and elegant by the intricately carved ornamental wooden railing, eyebrows drawn tightly together and lips pressed into a thin line.

"Ye-gongzi, Elder Xu sent us here for that holy weapon. If you bid on the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast as well, I'm afraid we won't have enough left....."

"It's fine. I'll use my own funds."

The attendants saw that Ye Wangxi had already made up his mind, so they exchanged a couple of furtive glances but said nothing else.

The Second Pavilion Master of Xuanyuan Pavilion announced crisply: "The starting bid is ten million gold. Ladies and gentlemen, bidding is now open."

"Eleven million."

"Twelve million."

The commotion rose alongside the soaring price.

"Nineteen million!"

"I bid twenty five million!"

With the bid shooting up by six million in one go, quite a number of cultivators sighed and sat down, shaking their heads. At this time, several silver tabs floated down from the second floor booths to the action master. She collected them from the air and nimbly fanned them out in her hand, a price written on each tab.

"The current highest bid." She scanned the tabs, then announced clearly, "From the Xuan booth, thirty five million."

"Thirty five million?!"

The crowd sucked in a cold breath and collectively turned to look at the Xuan booth on the second floor. Lights glowed hazily from behind the gentle drifting of the silver curtains, but there was no way to see just what kind of person was sitting inside.

"You could buy a whole palace on here with that money."

"Whose bid was it, a little excessive don't you think....."

"To have that kind of money to throw around, gotta be from one of the ten great sects. I wonder which one?"

Chu Wanning's eyes were closed. Hearing the price, he asked Mo Ran, "Did you bring enough money?"

"Absolutely not!" Meeting Song Qiutong here was the last thing he'd expected to happen, and Mo Ran only snapped out of his shock when he heard Chu Wanning call for him. He asked, alarmed, "What does Shizun mean to do?"

"Buy her."

Mo Ran's eyes opened wide as he waved his hands frantically: "No way, don't do it, this woman will just be a burden, where would we even put her? We'd have to rent an extra horse to travel and book an extra room at night, nope, don't do it."

"Who said anything about bringing her along? I'll just let her go after." Chu Wanning opened his eyes and held out his hand with a straight face, "Money."

Mo Ran clutched his money pouch. "I-I don't have any!"

"I'll pay you back when we get back."

"This money is for the holy weapon!"

"Don't you already have Jiangui? What do you need another for? Hand over the money!"

"....."

Mo Ran felt a headache coming on; this Song Qiutong..... when he'd met her in the past life, she had been a disciple of Rufeng Sect, and he had been razing Rufeng Sect's city to the ground. His heart had clenched at the way she looked a little like Shi Mei, so he'd spared her life. As time went on, she showed herself to be clever and docile, and her temperament was rather similar to Shi Mei's as well, so he eventually made her his empress.

That was one of Mo Ran's biggest regrets.

Chu Wanning and that kind heart of his inside that cold exterior actually wanted to buy her—how could Mo Ran possibly allow that to happen? Don't even mention forty million gold, he wouldn't even take that woman for four coppers.

As a matter of fact, even if they *paid* him forty million, he still wouldn't take her!

They were stuck in a stalemate when a tab floated down from the third floor. It was gold.

A buyout tab!

The golden tab indicated the highest bid at Xuanyuan Pavilion—there is no price written, for the tab itself denoted fifty million gold. Once this kind of bid got put down, no one really even had the means to keep bidding anymore, thus "buyout tab."

The crowd was dead silent for a second before bursting into an uproar.

"Rufeng Sect!"

"Rufeng Sect pulled out the buyout tab!"

Chu Wanning turned away from Mo Ran and his death grip on his money pouch to look outside. They were at just the right angle to see the first room on the third floor. Ye Wangxi didn't care for things like concealment; he had long ago pulled aside the snow moon silk curtains meant for secrecy, and was currently standing by the carved railing with his hands clasped lightly behind his back.

His expression was solemn, handsome face betraying nothing. He glanced down at the ruckus below, seemed somewhat aggravated, and turned to walk back into the private room.

Mo Ran let out a breath and said to Chu Wanning, "Shizun can rest easy. I lived with this Ye-gongzi back at the Peach Blossom Springs, so I'm fairly

acquainted with him. He's a good person, he won't do anything cruel to that Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast."

Meanwhile, inside Rufeng Sect's room on the third floor, Ye Wangxi sat down at the table covered with satin cloth intricately embroidered in gold and silver, and poured himself a cup of fragrant tea. Knocks sounded from the outside when he finished the tea.

Ye Wangxi's voice was gentle and polite: "Come in."

"Ye-xianjun, I've brought the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast for your inspection."

"Thank you. You can go."

Xuanyuan Pavilion's maid left, and there was nothing but silence in the room for a while. The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast knelt on the floor, bound hands and feet by spells, panic in her eyes as her whole body trembled, her eyes shaped like peach blossoms red at the edges from crying, looking truly pitiful.

Ye Wangxi glanced at her, not a thread of impropriety in those clear, principled eyes of his, and lifted a hand to dissipate the spells.

"It's cold on the floor. You must be scared; have a seat and some warm tea."

"....." The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast was still trembling, beautiful eyes wide and translucent like glass. She stayed where she was, cowering on the floor, too scared to talk, much less move.

Ye Wangxi sighed and gestured for the attendants to bring her a cloak.

"Please don't worry, miss. I didn't buy you for cultivation purposes. Put on the cloak first, then we can talk."

"You..... you....."

Seeing that she was still not moving, only looking pitifully up, Ye Wangxi shook his head with an exasperated smile and got down on one knee to be eye level with her.

"My name is Ye Wangxi, may I ask your name?"

"This one's name is.....Song." She gave Ye Wangxi a hesitant look through teary eyes, "Song Qiutong.....Thank you, Ye-gongzi."

Downstairs, Mo Ran was deep in thought.

In the past life, Song Qiutong had already been a disciple of Rufeng Sect by the time he'd met her. Ye Wangxi must have saved her from the auction house back then, too.

Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts generally weren't treated the same as regular people, but it was a different matter if they're a disciple of a major cultivation sect.

Mo Ran sighed internally. He didn't know Ye Wangxi that well, only that he was an upright, principled person, and had been second only to Chu Wanning in terms of strength back then. Mo Ran had crossed swords with him once while slaughtering the seventy two cities of Rufeng Sect; that fierce, imposing swordsmanship and dignified posture had left a deep impression.

Seventy two cities of Rufeng Sect spread across the land, and Mo Ran had taken them all without the slightest bit of effort. And those lords of the cities, with their run-on titles and widespread tales of might and glory, each and every one of them were as dirt beneath his boot.

Save for this Ye Wangxi, and only this Ye Wangxi—the seven cities under his command had given Mo Ran no end of troubles. Even in the end, when the cities had fallen and that person knelt bloodied in a field of corpses, his eyes were still clear and unrelenting.

The Nangong leaders of the Rufeng Sect had long since fled by then, and countless others were groveling for their lives at Mo Ran's feet.

But Ye Wangxi only knelt there with his eyes closed and brows drawn tightly together, his expression frosty.

Before killing him, Mo Ran had asked, genuinely: "Will you surrender?"

"I will not."

Mo Ran had smiled from where he sat on the gilded seat adorned with dragon and phoenix, meant for the master of Rufeng Sect. Beneath dark lashes, his eyes swept across the throngs of people; ordinary disciples aside, there were six or seven city lords and more than a dozen generals, all of them prostrating on the dusty ground and trembling.

A crow circled in the ashen grey sky above banners the color of blood, cawing. Mo Ran lifted a nonchalant hand: "Kill them all."

Before death, Ye Wangxi had said: "There is not a single man in all the seventy cities of Rufeng."

Blood splattered across the air.

Mo Ran held in his arms his newest acquisition, the beautiful Song Qiutong, her loveliness unparalleled, delicate body trembling nonstop at the hellish scene before her.

"Don't be afraid, there's a good girl. You'll be staying with this Venerable One from now on." Mo Ran stroked her hair, smiling, "Come, tell me your name again? What did you do at Rufeng Sect? I forgot what you said earlier."

"This one's name is..... Song Qiutong." Her voice was frightened, "I was..... I was Ye Wangxi's..... maid....."

Ye Wangxi's maid. That's what she had told Mo Ran back then.

As for how Song Qiutong, a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, had been allowed into Rufeng Sect, and how she became Ye Wangxi's maid, Mo Ran had no idea. Until today, at the Xuanyuan Pavilion after rebirth, when he finally realized that it was Ye Wangxi who paid an exorbitant sum to save her from the clutches of danger.

But hardly anyone knew that a large part of the reason why Ye Wangxi was finally defeated by Mo Ran was thanks to information divulged by Song Qiutong.

The thought made Mo Ran scowl, the loathing he felt toward Song Qiutong growing even deeper—he must have been out of his mind to think this woman was anything like Shi Mei.

"The last item of this auction is a masterless holy weapon." The Second Pavilion Master's pleasant voice interrupted Mo Ran's thoughts, "Put up for auction on behalf of a third party."

There were always some rumors floating around before each auction session as to what kind of precious treasures will be up for sale. Thus, in contrast to the wild reaction to the "Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast" earlier, the gathered crowd of cultivators, although antsy still, actually settled down a bit.

The white jade lotus bloomed once again, and the stone platform rose slowly, carrying a satin case embellished in silver with celestial bodies and

elegant landscapes.

The satin case was slim and intricately embroidered, and anyone in the know could tell with a single glance that the fine needlework came from the famed embroidery house of Gusu, XianYun Pavilion. The holy weapon aside, just this case alone was worth hundreds in gold.

"This holy weapon was found at the burial mound on the Jun Mountain. Its former master had passed, and we at Xuanyuan Pavilion have verified that it has yet to take a new master." The Second Pavilion Master paused before continuing, "As everyone knows, a holy weapon's name is engraved on its body. However, time has worn away the inscription on this holy weapon, and only one character remains discernible—Gui [Return]."

Someone muttered: "Enough prattling, open the box already."

"Aiyo, let it be, you'll get used to it, Xuanyuan Pavilion always goes at it like this. Gotta talk it up before showing us the goods."

"I guess."

Amused by the chatter, Mo Ran turned toward Chu Wanning to quip about it, only to see Chu Wanning's face pale as frost, his sword-straight eyebrows tight and strained as slender fingers of cold jade pressed against his temple. Startled, he hurriedly asked: "Shizun, you okay?"

"Suddenly..... suddenly don't feel so good."

"Don't feel good how? Did you catch another cold?" Mo Ran scooted over and felt his forehead, "Your temperature's fine."

"....." Chu Wanning shook his head without saying anything, looking all out of sorts.

Unsure what else to do, Mo Ran offered: "I'll pour you some tea." He filled a cup with steaming tea, paused, then added a bit of the just-purchased Tapir Fragrance Dew.

Sage Hanlin's medicines were renowned the world over, and Chu Wanning indeed seemed better after drinking the tea mixed with Tapir Fragrance Dew, some color coming back to his face as he turned his attention back to the auction downstairs. Mo Ran tidied up the tea set and poured him another cup.

"Although there is no way to know this holy weapon's full name, since the stars have aligned to bring it back into the world, and its inscription already contains the word gui [return], Xuanyuan Pavilion has named it 'Guilai' [To Return] for the time being."

Someone in the crowd finally lost his patience, yelling: "Pavilion Master, you've talked it up enough, we're quite built up, open the box and let's have a look at the holy weapon itself already."

The Second Pavilion Master smiled: "All things in due time, Xianjun. In accordance with the laws of the cultivation world, when the master of a holy weapon passes, the weapon shall be inherited by his blood heirs. 'Guilai' was found at a burial mound, and we have no way of knowing its original master's identity. However, once the case is opened, all present are welcome to reach out with their spiritual energy and test the weapon; if it resonates with someone, that will mean that the person is of the original master's bloodline, and 'Guilai' will naturally belong to that person, free of charge."

"Hahaha, as if something that coincidental could ever happen."

The gathered cultivators burst into laughter.

"That's right, what are the chances."

"Might as well try it tho, can't hurt."

The Second Pavilion Master beamed at the crowd and agreed crispy:
"Indeed, it can't hurt to try your luck. Now then, if I can ask for your attention, we will be removing the lid."

She snapped her fingers, and a pair of Guyue'ye disciples, both young girls of around fifteen or sixteen, approached from either side. They flew up and landed gracefully on the lotus platform, and placed their slender, jade-like hands on the satin case. Each had an intricate crystal key that they inserted carefully into the keyholes on the case.

There were two clicks, and the case unlocked.

Watching the scene before him, Mo Ran found himself thinking back to when he had acquired Jiangui at Jincheng Lake. It was clearly said then that only "one's most beloved person in the world" could open Ever-Yearning, but for some reason the brocade box had opened in Chu Wanning's hands.

The audience held their breath, countless eyes staring from underneath hooded cloaks at that narrow box. The gold embroidered lid opened slowly as the very air in the room strained with tension like a bow pulled to the limit, and despite the thousands of people present, it was so quiet that even the sound of a single hair falling to the ground could be heard.

Every single person was staring unblinkingly at the ancient blade revealed inside the box, aged by time. Some greedily, some curiously, some appreciatively.....

Only Mo Ran's eyes flew wide open the instant he saw the weapon lying in the box, all color draining rapidly from his face.

He had lived two lifetimes, owned two holy weapons, and crossed blades with over a dozen other wielders of holy weapons. He had thought that he wouldn't care for whatever holy weapon the Xuanyuan Pavilion was selling.

But he was wrong.

"Holy weapon Guilai." The Second Pavilion Master's crisp voice shattered the silence, "A long blade, four feet in length, three inches in width. Scabbardless, with a body of pure black that does not reflect."

Mo Ran's fingertips trembled minutely as two words slipped past his lips.

"Bu'gui....." [No Return]

No Return.....

*Affairs of the past upon vermillion bridge in emerald green;
Another year goes but still you do not return.*

"Mo Ran, now that you have your own holy weapon, why do you ask me to seal its spiritual cognizance, rather than give it a name?"

"To answer Shizun, this disciple is uncultured, and there's only one chance to name it. I worry that I'll pick a bad name and be stuck with it."

"A-Ran, have you still not decided on a name for your long blade yet? Surely you can't just keep calling it 'blade' this 'blade' that."

"It's fine, it's fine, I'm just taking my time thinking about it. It's a holy weapon, after all, it deserves a super awesome name, hahaha."

Then, Shi Mei had died.

Mo Ran wanted Chu Wanning to release the seal so that he could name his holy weapon "Mingjing."

But at that time, Chu Wanning had said that his spiritual energy was still corrupted from the fight against the ghost realm, and he truly did not have the strength to release the sealing spell, so he could only leave it at that.

Later, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning completely severed relations, and Mo Ran was loath to ask him about the unsealing anymore. And so the bloodstained long blade remained nameless through all those years and countless battles. But it no longer mattered; not a soul in the world was unaware of Mo Weiyu and the hellish blade in his hand that fed on blood and hatred.

In the end.

Chu Wanning died as well.

And the name-sealing spell that had been on Mo Ran's blade for more than a decade disappeared with him.

That night, Mo Ran downed copious amounts of pear blossom wine. A bit tipsy, he ran his hand along the ice-cold body of the blade, no longer able to tell if what he felt was ecstasy or sorrow. He flicked it and listened to the reverberations from within like the sound of drums and horns on the battlefield, like a haitang chilled to the bone. He lay on the roof of Wushan Palace, laughing uncontrollably, from delighted to deranged.

He couldn't remember if he had shed any tears that night, only that, when he woke in the morning, the long blade that had gone nameless for over a decade had been engraved with two clear-cut characters.

"Bu'gui."

*You will not return.
Ever again.*

But why did the weapon that had accompanied him through countless battles in the last lifetime appear in this reborn world, and how did it end up at YuanXuan Pavilion's auction?!

Before Mo Ran could think on it further, all the thousands of cultivators at the auction house released streams of spiritual energies, each rushing to commune with Bu'gui.

Mo Ran: "....."

There's no use. Since it was Bu'gui, and since Mo Ran was here, there definitely wouldn't be another person in the world who could command this long blade.

But did its appearance have something to do with that little bastard hiding behind the scenes? If so, then for him to release Bu'gui into the world at this time meant that he knew that Mo Ran and Chu Wanning were trying to track him down, and that his goal wasn't to test for other spiritual essences.

Then what was he trying to do?!

And also, was this Bu'gui real? Or was it merely bait, like those fakes at Jincheng Lake?

Mind filled with questions, Mo Ran reached out with a tendril of his own spiritual energy.

If Bu'gui wasn't a fake, then it will surely resonate with him. The resonance can't be too obvious, to avoid notice, so, just a little bit.....

He had only just released the tiniest thread of spiritual energy when a faint groan came from behind him.

“.....Shizun?!”

Mo Ran whipped his head around to find Chu Wanning collapsed at the table, brows locked and lips blue, snow white robes spread out like smoke, his handsome face paler than frost. He had actually passed out, eyes screwed shut like some chronic illness was flaring up.

Mo Ran never would have expected something like this to happen out of the blue; he panicked, pulling back his spiritual energy and running to Chu Wanning’s side, cradling him in his arms: “Shizun, what’s wrong?!”

Ch.82 This Venerable One Can’t Believe It

Outside the Fragrance Inn of Rainbell Isle stood the willowy innkeeper, all dressed up with pearl bracelets jingling on her wrists as she leaned against the door, eating snake gall-fried melon seeds.

Most people end up staying at her place whenever Xuanyuan Pavilion holds an action, since she was clever on top of being pretty, a flicker of those beautiful eyes and she could easily guess what it was her guests wanted.

It was just past noon, and the sun beamed brightly from overhead. The innkeeper spit out some melon seed shells, thinking that the auction should be over in another two hours or so. The inns at Rainbell Isle were all fairly expensive, and the visiting cultivators don’t tend to stay, so she didn’t expect to make much from rooms today. But that’s alright, these cultivators, vigilantes, and whatnot still have to eat before leaving, and she fully intended to squeeze them for dinner.

She flicked some bits of fruit peel off her skirt, then turned to yell toward the waiter inside: “ErFu, wipe the tables and chairs down again, and fetch a basket of the melon seeds I fried, put a plate on every table. Gotta get ready for our guests tonight.”

“Alrighty boss, right away.” The waiter jogged off.

Done bathing in the sun and snacking on melon seeds, the innkeeper grinned contently and was just about to head inside to supervise the work when she suddenly noticed a black-white silhouette at the end of the road and approaching fast. Once close, she saw that it was a handsome cultivator dressed in black and holding someone in his arms, just as he burst into her inn at full tilt in a burning panic.

“A room, room room room!!”

“.....”

Maybe because of how suddenly he had burst in and how strangely he was acting, but the waiter only stared at him in bewilderment with his mouth hanging open.

Mo Ran roared angrily: “I said I want a room! What are you, deaf? Where’s your boss!!”

“Aiyo xianjun.” The voice of a young woman sounded from behind him, a little simpering and a lot apologetic, hard to be mad at a voice like that. Mo Ran turned around and came face to face with the innkeeper’s agreeable smile, “My

apologies for the wait, he's new. I am the innkeeper, please feel free to come to me if you need anything."

With his dark, handsome eyebrows raised, Mo Ran hurriedly repeated: "Give me a room!"

The innkeeper looked him over quickly and discreetly: he was wearing a cloak, so probably an attendant at the Xuanyuan auction, but the hood had fallen off in his haste to reveal his handsome face that yet had a trace of the tenderness of youth; but that wasn't important, what was important was the brocade pouch embroidered with a giant tortoise that was tied around his wrist—it was a qiankun pouch^[2] from Xuanyuan Pavilion, specifically gifted to its patrons to carry purchased goods in.

He has money.
The innkeeper's eyes gleamed.
Lots of money.

She glanced at the person in his arms next. He was covered in a cloak and his face was turned inward, so she couldn't see what he looked like, but the innkeeper's eyes were sharp as a hawk's, sweeping quickly over those snow-white robes made of high-quality silk before zoning in on that hand peeking out from the wide opening of a sleeve.

Long and slender, porcelain-fine skin, delicate fingertips, shapely joints.

A beauty.
The innkeeper understood immediately.
Sure, it's a beautiful man, but it's not like dual cultivation between men is unheard of in the cultivation world, nothing to bat an eye at.

"DaFu, open a room." The innkeeper wasted no time and asked no questions, ordering briskly with a snap of her fingers, "Get the best one we have."

Chu Wanning's sickness came suddenly and without the slightest sign. It was a good thing they were at Guyue'ye's domain, where good medicines physicians were readily available.

The sage doctor's eyes were closed as he took Chu Wanning's pulse with lightly calloused fingertips on his wrist, not uttering a single sound for a long time.

Mo Ran couldn't wait any longer: "Doctor, how is my Shizun?"

"It's not a big issue, but....."

Mo Ran seriously couldn't stand people that talked in circles and beat around the bush like this. He pressed, eyes wide: "But what?"

"But it's quite strange; your master's cultivation is remarkable, achieved by few in this world. Yet my careful examination just now revealed that his spiritual core is exceedingly fragile, even more so than that of a fledgeling cultivator."

If cultivation is water, then the spiritual core is the vessel holding the water. One's spiritual core is inborn, while cultivation is built up slowly over time. It's easier for someone with an innately powerful core to cultivate, but once one's cultivation reaches a certain point, it would begin to bolster the spiritual core, so generally speaking, the cultivation and the core are interdependent and complementary.

An eminent zongshi like Chu Wanning would certainly have an extremely robust core, so physicians don't generally bother to check when taking his pulse. Mo Ran was shocked: "How is that possible?!"

"I thought the same. But I checked time and again, and it was the same every time."

"My Shizun's spiritual core is weaker than a fledgeling cultivator's? H-how could that be, there's no way! Could you please take another look, maybe there was a mistake somewhere?"

"I have always been most cautious in my practice, and have never said anything I am not absolutely certain of. If the young xianjun doesn't believe me, then feel free to get a second opinion on his core, it will be the same."

Mo Ran was stunned.

The doctor continued: "Precisely because your master's spiritual core is so fragile, and he appears to have received communion from a powerful weapon just now, one that has some sort of resonance with him yet does not belong to him, so he suffered rebound as a result, and then lost consciousness because his core could not take it. I will prescribe some medicinal decoctions, have him take it and get plenty of rest, he will be fine."

Mo Ran saw the doctor off and came back to sit by Chu Wanning's bed with his cheek propped up in one hand, watching him in a daze.

A weak core?

How is that even possible.....

But the old man just now couldn't possibly have known what happened at Xuanyuan Pavilion, yet correctly surmised that Chu Wanning had encountered a powerful weapon earlier, so he likely wasn't spouting nonsense.

And also, that "Bu'gui"; Mo Ran had only just released a tiny bit of spiritual energy at Xuanyuan Pavilion earlier when Chu Wanning collapsed all of a sudden, so he didn't get a chance to see if that long blade was indeed his holy weapon from the past life. But if so, then why would Bu'gui resonate with Chu Wanning? And cause a rebound?

He stared at Chu Wanning, spacing out while his thoughts tied themselves into a big knot. He didn't know how long had passed when Chu Wanning's brows started scrunching up, his eyelashes quivering like he's having another nightmare.

He had no idea what compelled him to, but Mo Ran reached out and gently smoothed out his brows: "Shizun....."

"....."

"Shizun..... Chu Wanning..... I've already lived two lifetimes, but could it be that there are still secrets about you that I don't know?"

The innkeeper finished boiling the medicine in the inn's kitchen in short order, and came upstairs to deliver it.

Mo Ran tasted it—ridiculously bitter as expected; Chu Wanning hated bitter things. Mo Ran sighed and called back the innkeeper who was just about to leave.

"Innkeep, do you have anything sweet?"

"Aie..... we make fresh sugar candies, but today's batch is all gone already. I can send someone to go buy some if xianjun would like?"

Mo Ran looked at the steaming medicine and shook his head: "Nevermind then, the medicine will be cold by then, it has to be taken hot to be effective. Thanks though."

"Ah, no problem, please feel free to call on me if you need anything else." Having said that, the innkeeper left tactfully, closing the door on her way out.

Mo Ran carried the medicine over and set it down by the bed, then sat at the edge of the bed with one hand on his knee, reaching out with the other to help Chu Wanning up: "Shizun, it's time for your medicine."

Mo Ran had plenty of practice feeding him medicine from the last lifetime; holding Chu Wanning in one arm so that he was leaning against himself, he scooped up a spoonful of the medicine with his other hand, blowing to cool it, and then slowly fed it to him.

Thinking about it now, this is already the second time since his rebirth that he's taking care of Chu Wanning. He dislikes this person, yet feels such unease whenever he gets sick; he really couldn't understand it.

"Bitter....."

The person in his arm tasted it despite being still unconscious, pulling his eyebrows together and turning away, refusing to drink any more.

Mo Ran was already used to him acting like this; holding another spoonful, he tugged him back around and coaxed patiently: "One more, you'll feel better after, here."

And fed him another spoonful.

Chu Wanning coughed up half of it, eyebrows furrowing even more.

"So bitter....."

"It's sweet, the next one is sweet, come come."

"Nngh....."

"The next one! Promise! It's unbelievably sweet! This Venerable One had people go out and find the sweetest syrup in all the land!" Mo Ran was so distracted coaxing Chu Wanning into drinking the medicine that he forgot himself for a moment, absentmindedly running his mouth on words from the past life, "It's delicious, you'll regret it if you don't open up~"

Just like that, he managed to sweet talk Chu Wanning into drinking the whole bowl. Mo Ran let out a breath after the last spoonful, and was just about to get up and tidy things up when there was a sudden flash of white, and a slap landed soundly on his cheek before he could even react.

"You liar, get the hell out!"

Chu Wanning snapped, then his head dipped and he went right back to sleep, leaving Mo Ran with his mouth hanging half open, holding his cheek pitifully. He was just about to get mad when the person in his arm groaned softly like he was dreaming about something distressing, his face blanching.

Seeing him like this, Mo Ran couldn't even get mad anymore. He didn't have any candy, but his gaze landed on the qiankun pouch sitting at the head of the bed, and, struck by a sudden idea, he took out a bottle of Tapir Fragrance Dew. He tapped Chu Wanning's cheek with his hand, not too gentle but not too hard, and let that count as revenge.

"Wait here a bit, I'll go make you some sweet dew water to drink."

"....."

Chu Wanning didn't respond, so Mo Ran moved to lay him back down. But when he leaned closer in the process, he heard a low exhale, and then a slurred mumble: "It.....wronged you....."

Mo Ran froze: "What?"

Chu Wanning's eyes were tightly closed, his eyelashes trembling incessantly as if going through something excruciating, the blood draining from his face bit by bit. He seems to have fallen into another dream, one that was even more frightening than the last. He shook his head minutely, an uncharacteristically sorrowful expression appearing on that habitually impassive face.

"I.....it was I....."

For a split second, Mo Ran felt his heart stutter erratically, a strange feeling flooding his chest as if there was a secret right in front of him, separated by only one last layer of haze, a secret he was on the very verge of unveiling. Staring fixedly at Chu Wanning, he asked quietly: "You what?"

"It was I.....who wronged.....you....."

He felt dazed all of a sudden; he didn't know if the dim light of the candle was making him see things, but he thought he saw a glimmer of wetness in Chu Wanning's thick eyelashes.

It was I who wronged you.

The words left his lips light as mist, but sounded to him like the crashing of thunder.

Mo Ran shot up abruptly from the bed and then immediately went stiff, pupils contracting into tiny pinpoints as he stared disbelievingly at the person on the bed. His expression changed instantly, heart pounding like a stampede of horses and hands clenching tightly into fists, feeling the blood in his body catch on fire in one moment and then freeze over in the very next.

"What did you say?Wh....."

After a moment of being frozen in shock, Mo Ran suddenly seized Chu Wanning by the throat, his eyes flashing with danger, the guise of guileless naivety that he had worn since rebirth vanishing into thin air, "Chu Wanning, what did you just say?"

"Say it again! SAY IT AGAIN!!"

It was I who wronged you; I won't blame you, in life or in death.

It was a curse he could never forget, a nightmare that had haunted him for two lifetimes.

How many times had he closed his eyes only to hear these words sighed by his ear, though the speaker was long gone from the world.

But these were words that Chu Wanning had spoken in the past life only as he lay dying; why would he, now——why would he——

Unless Chu Wanning was also reborn?!

Ch.83 This Venerable One Wants You

>>noncon kissing, noncon mention

The unhinged thought made Mo Ran see red. Reason had left him, and he shook uncontrollably as his hand tightened around Chu Wanning's throat, pressing for a response in a low-pitched roar.

If he says the rest of it, if he says "in life or in death." Then definitely..... definitely.....

"Ngh!"

A stifled groan sounded by his ear; Chu Wanning couldn't breathe, his face flushed from the lack of air as his struggles grew weaker.

Mo Ran stilled, madness and clarity chasing one another across his red-tinted, wide-open eyes before he abruptly snapped out of it and hastily let go. Chu Wanning slumped heavily back onto the bed, the five stripes of finger-shaped bruises stark against his neck gradually calling Mo Ran back to his senses.

"....." He opened his mouth, wanting to call 'Shizun', but it wouldn't come out; he tried to say 'Chu Wanning', but his voice failed him there too, until finally, hesitantly, he uttered hoarsely, "You....."

His throat felt parched, as if scorched by fire; Mo Ran swallowed with difficulty while picking up the scattered pieces of his rationality, scenes from yesterday flashing before his eyes: Chu Wanning has never acted strangely in this lifetime, there's no way he was reborn.

But then why would he say those words—his dying words in the past life, "it was I who wronged you"—now, at this time?

Weren't those words that Chu Wanning had uttered only to save Xue Meng, to save those sanctimonious cultivators, empty words that he had said only because he had no other choice?

He had never believed, never *wanted* to believe that Chu Wanning would genuinely admit his wrongs to him, that he would actually say something softly compassionate to him. No matter what, Chu Wanning was definitely lying to him, he definitely detested him. No matter what, this Shizun of his had always looked down on him, had never treated him with sincerity.

He didn't regret killing him at all.

He didn't regret.....

Mo Ran turned away, slowly closing his eyes.

He didn't want to stay here even a single second longer; what did it matter to him if Chu Wanning lives or dies!

He turned to leave.
He wanted to leave.
But his feet refused to move.

It was I who wronged you.

In his memories, that cold, handsome face, covered in blood as it was, had looked gentle in the very end. At the edge of Kunlun's Heavenly Lake, that person, lying in a pool of blood, had slowly lifted a hand and poked his forehead; his fingers were already ice-cold, yet there was warmth in those phoenix eyes. But Mo Ran had been sure, back then, that he was only seeing things.

I won't blame you, in life or in death.

Chu Wanning had whispered, even as a trail of blood dripped slowly from his eyes.

"Mo Ran....."

The person on the bed murmured in his dream; just two quiet syllables, and the person being called began to tremble all over. By the time he realized what was happening, Mo Ran was already standing at the side of the bed, one hand braced against the headboard as he leaned over Chu Wanning, staring fixedly at his pale face.

Those thin, lightly colored lips opened slightly in another utterance.
“Mo Ran.....”

Closing his eyes, Mo Ran drew his brows tightly together as his fingers dug into the cold, hard surface of the quince wood, as if trying hard to restrain something. But he couldn't in the end, and it came out in a raw whisper: “Chu Wanning, did you mean it?”

“Everything that you said, did you mean it all.....?”

His chest hurt so much it felt like it might burst; since there's no way Chu Wanning was also reborn, then for him to say these words now, it must mean that, at this point in time, he already feels remorse in his heart that he hadn't treated him right.

Did he mean it?

Chu Wanning was only talking in his sleep, of course he wouldn't answer. But still, Mo Ran waited wishfully for one.

“.....”

He waited with his eyes closed for a long while, but there was only silence. Mo Ran sighed quietly and reluctantly opened his eyes.

Only to be met unexpectedly by a pair of hazy phoenix eyes, half-lidded between wakefulness and slumber.

He didn't know when Chu Wanning had opened his eyes, but it was clear from his face that he wasn't truly awake and aware, that it was only a momentary stirring between bouts of torment. That pair of eyes the color of the night sky were vacant and glazed, as if they held eternity within.

Yuheng of the Night Sky was always piercing as lightning; he rarely ever looked so dazed.

Without those habitual sharp edges of his, the person lying there looked so unexpectedly beautiful, the corners of his eyes tinged with a faint redness, looking at him so unguardedly.

Mo Ran felt a violent tremor in his heart and a tightness in his throat; voice low, he murmured: “You.....”

He looked much too like the way he had when they made love in the past life; something stirred inside Mo Ran, and for a moment he felt as if he was still at Wushan Palace, and Chu Wanning was his prisoner, his personal plaything. The thought made his mouth feel dry and his breaths grow heavy.

I can't.....

I don't like him.

Don't touch him anymore.

The sins of the bygone life are already in the past; in this life, we're nothing more than master and disciple.

And so Mo Ran stayed as he was, looking down at Chu Wanning with one hand braced against the headboard, holding himself back from crossing that line. His hair pooled over his shoulder from where it was tied back in a ponytail, the tips brushing against the pillow.

Chu Wanning lay there fully dressed with his long hair spread loosely about him. His expression was dazed and insensate at first, and some time passed before Mo Ran's reflection slowly appeared in his eyes. Chu Wanning hesitated, and then, as if still caught in the clutches of the nightmare, unable to discern the when and the where, he reached out slowly with a hand, paused in mid air for a moment, and at last touched Mo Ran's brow.

"It was I who wronged you....."

He spoke the words with an uncharacteristic gentleness, the way he had in the past life.

Mo Ran felt something inside him collapse with a thunderous boom.

Blood boiling and head feverish, all the sense and rationality he had worked so hard to retrieve fell apart in a mere instant. Without even thinking about any of it, he had already given in to that familiar desire, leaning down and ravenously capturing those slightly parted lips in his own. Instantly, the past came crashing back like a wave, melting away the surroundings like snow and frost. He felt as if he was back at Wushan Palace, amidst silky red satin, illuminated by the light of candles gilded with dragon and phoenix, and, beneath the red draperies, this person was struggling and spitting curses, panting and humiliated yet unable to get away, helpless against his unyielding grasp.

"Nn....."

The noise that Chu Wanning let out between the slide of warm wetness drove Mo Ran mad. All that about not liking him, hating him, and not touching him again, all of it vaporized into thin air.

Mo Ran felt as if he hadn't yet died, that the lightly trembling body beneath his still belonged to him.

He wanted to kiss him, to hold him, to humiliate him and torment him until this lofty, immaculate person is unable to take any more, until he cries and begs and loses himself between the sheets.

"Chu Wanning....." He murmured hoarsely.

A wave of heat rolled through him, washing over his very soul; even the tips of his fingers felt like they were on fire.

Once again closing his lips over those cool, soft ones, still tasting slightly of the medicine's bitterness, the beating of his heart was like the thundering of drums inside his chest as he kissed with abandon, mad with desire. He knew this person through and through; since his rebirth, he had been loath to be intimate with him because of the resentment he held, but, kissing him now, it felt like pure ecstasy, a high so intense it ate away at him, like the first taste of sweet dew on the tongue of a traveller dying of thirst in the desert, like being enveloped in the soft warmth of a fur coat warmed over the fire pan in the bitter cold of a freezing night.

He thought that he would surely have nothing to do with him in this reborn life.

He hadn't expected to lose to his desires in the end, to be driven out of control by just a few words from him, to be kissing him like this.

If not for the fact that he just couldn't get Chu Wanning's robes open, and got pricked by something falling out of his robes while trying, he might have given in and taken his Shizun right then and there without any thought, consequences be damned.

Clang!

Something metallic pricked Mo Ran's finger and fell on the bed, rolling a little before coming to a stop.

Mo Ran was far too turned on to mind the scratch, only throwing an irritated glare at the object before turning back to Chu Wanning's ridiculous robes. It was one thing when he kept his distance and didn't touch, but now that he was on top of him, the feelings from his past life came rushing back, and just the thought of how Chu Wanning's smooth, narrow waist had felt under his hands made him feel unbearably hot and heavy.

But Chu Wanning's silken white robes were impossible to get off, almost like they were enchanted with some kind of spell!

Mo Ran cursed under his breath and slammed his fist against the headboard before resentfully climbing off the bed to go fetch his blade to make short work of that thrice-wrapped belt sash.

As he was sitting up, he saw that metallic object out of the corner of his eyes. He didn't pay it any mind at first, but then a bolt of clarity flashed suddenly through his arousal-addled mind.

He stilled, then his head snapped around to look at that thing again.

It was a golden hair clasp, vibrantly colorful and decorated with orchids and butterflies. The very same one that he had bought for Xia Sini at the Peach Blossom Springs after days of saving up his feathers.

He had personally pinned it to Xia Sini's ponytail to cheer up his sullen little shidi, saying: "Little kids should wear lively colors like gold and red."

Mo Ran picked up the hair clasp, feeling like he had been doused in cold water, staring at it in a stupor.

Hang on.....what does this mean?

Why would Chu Wanning have something that he gave to Xia Sini?!

Could it be.....

A frightening thought appeared in Mo Ran's mind. He turned around slowly, and his gaze, still dark with desire, landed on Chu Wanning. His Shizun had passed out again; Mo Ran stared at his face, looking at those lips reddened from his kisses, and his heart skipped a few beats.

No way, absolutely not.

He must be out of his mind.....

Was Chu Wanning not just messing with him?

Is, is.....Xia Sini——seriously Chu Wanning's son?

Mo Ran shuddered at the thought, feeling like his head was about to explode!

Author's Notes:

Weiyu 手: (raising his hand) Can't have a home run? I protest.

Chu Wanning: Protest ineffective, keep dreaming.

Xue Meng: Protest ineffective, keep dreaming.

Meatbun: Protest ineffective, keep dreaming.

Jinjiang Administrator: Protest ineffective, keep dreaming your impossible dreams.

Ch.84 This Venerable One Stole a Kiss and You Don't Even Know

When Chu Wanning woke up, it was to the sight of Mo Ran spacing out at the table with his cheek propped up in his hand, the reflection of the candle flame flickering in his pitch-black eyes, bright in the vacant gaze.

"....."

He thought about getting up, but could feel no strength in his limbs and had to give up.

The patterned lilac curtains wafted gently. He turned onto his side, watching Mo Ran without a sound, but that silly boy only remained lost in thought, not at all noticing that his Shizun was awake.

But who could blame him? Anyone who finds out that their lover has already had a son with some other woman would be just as shocked.

Was Xia Sini really Chu Wanning's child? How could that be..... Chu Wanning is so aloof and particular, which woman would even be capable of catching his eye?

Besides, if this whole thing is for real, then he must have had this child in the past life too, but in all the years they had spent together then, Chu Wanning couldn't have been further from what one would expect of a married man, in his daily conduct and in between the sheets.

But then how else to explain this golden butterfly hair clasp!

Mo Ran banged his head against the table in anguish, just about to lose it from how confusing it all was!

He wasn't that smart to begin with, and never could wrap his head around any twisty turny things like this; the more he thought the more his head hurt, until he finally grabbed his head and flopped onto the table with a despairing "ngah" and stayed there, unmoving.

"Mo Ran, what are you doing?"

Said an even, soothing voice, pleasant like the chime of scattering jade, with a slightly hoarse undertone.

Mo Ran bounced up instantly in surprise: "Shizun, you're awake?"

"Mn." Chu Wanning coughed lightly before looking up at him, "Is this..... Rainbell Isle's inn?"

"Y-yeah." Mo Ran stood and went over to the bed, where he noticed a small tear on Chu Wanning's lower lip. His face immediately turned red as he thought back to how he had lost all control in his lust-induced haze and very nearly made a serious mistake.

Seeing his perturbation, Chu Wanning asked: "What is it?"

"Nothing nothing." Mo Ran waved his hands and hastily changed the topic, "Anyway, Shizun suddenly fainted at Xuanyuan Pavilion, so I carri.....cough, brought you here to rest. Then I got a physician to take a look at you and prescribe some medicine, and then....."

Heard you sleepalking, got reminded of some past affairs, couldn't help myself and kissed you.

But of course he couldn't say such things. Mo Ran's voice trailed off, his gaze uncharacteristically frantic, flustered even.

Hearing that he was examined by a doctor, and seeing the strange expression on Mo Ran's face, Chu Wanning felt his heart drop—maybe he had found out about the poison that turns him small. His hands on the quilt tightened subconsciously as he asked in a hoarse voice:

"What did the physician say?"

"He said Shizun was affected by that holy weapon, and that's what made him faint." Mo Ran hesitated for a moment before continuing, "Shizun, your spiritual core....."

"Don't worry about it, it's just a bit weaker than the average core."

Mo Ran blinked. He was thinking about how both Chu Xun and Chu Wanning had scars over their hearts and considering the possibility of some kind of connection there, but the way Chu Wanning talks about it, that doesn't seem to be the case. He couldn't help asking: "But how? Shizun is so powerful, there's no way your spiritual core is frail by birth. When did it start?"

"A long time ago. I was injured once, many years ago, and it's been like this ever since." Chu Wanning waved his hand indifferently; that's not what he was concerned about—"Did he say anything else?"

Mo Ran shook his head: "Nope."

Chu Wanning looked thoughtfully at him in the candlelight's dim haziness: "Then what were you banging your head on the table for just now?"

"....." Mo Ran tried and failed to hold it in, so he threw caution to the winds and took out the golden butterfly hair clasp from his sleeve, setting it in his palm.

"I found this."

"....."

"On you."

The hair clasp glinted in the light as Chu Wanning's heart sank lower and lower.

So he had been found out after all.

He sighed quietly. A few moments passed in silence, neither of them speaking. Finally, Chu Wanning closed his eyes, and was just about to come clean when he heard Mo Ran mumble in a small voice: "Shizun, is Xia-shidi..... truly your son?"

Chu Wanning: "....."

He opened his eyes, the blood that had been frozen in his veins a moment ago beginning to circulate again. He was lost for words for a while as he stared silently at Mo Weiyu, who stood by the bed with a complicated expression, and then, slowly, a clear verdict formed in Chu Wanning's gaze: "Moron."

"That's right." Chu Wanning lifted a hand and calmly took back the hair clasp before Mo Ran could even react, "Didn't I already tell you before? Why are you asking again."

Mo Ran buried his face in his hand: "I'm just.....making sure....."

But despite Chu Wanning's repeated confirmations that Xia Sini was indeed his flesh and blood, Mo Ran still didn't quite believe it. Shoving down his intense feelings of dismay, Mo Ran decided to grill Xia Sini about it the next time he sees his little shidi. Until those two actually acknowledge their blood ties to one another, he'd sooner die than believe it!

Chu Wanning got some strength back in his limbs after a bit of rest, and moved to sit up in bed.

"My clothes....."

He ran his hand over his collars and paused, frowning: "Why is it so disheveled?"

Mo Ran: "Cough."

Fearful that he might remember some fragments of what happened earlier, Mo Ran hurriedly steered the topic away: "Shizun, you must be hungry right? I heard the food at this inn's pretty good, especially the wensi tofu, let's go down and get a bite? My treat."

Chu Wanning shot him a cold look: "What, with the money I gave you?"

But still brushed his voluminous sleeves and opened the door to go downstairs.

Rainbell Isle's dishes were similar to Yangzhou's—light and refreshing, with a tendency toward sweetness, very agreeable to Chu Wanning's tastes.

The auction was over by now and many of the attendants have already left, and the two of them had also requested a private booth, so there wasn't much of a need to wear cloaks to conceal their identities anymore. Taking their seats inside, a waiter came and poured them each a cup of biluochun green tea and handed them a menu before retreating.

"Shizun can look through the menu first."

"You can order. I'm pretty ok with all the Jiangnan style dishes." Chu Wanning said as he lifted the cup and took a small sip of the tea.

But his brows furrowed as soon as the tea touched his lips: "....."

Mo Ran: "What is it? Too hot?"

".....It's nothing. Maybe the weather is too dry, my lip is a bit cracked." Chu Wanning replied as he touched the corner of his lips uncertainly.

Weird, when did that happen?

"....."

Mo Ran lowered his head guiltily.

It'll be a while before the food is ready, so Chu Wanning took the time to discuss what happened at Xuanyuan Pavilion with Mo Ran. They had left early, so they didn't know who won the holy weapon in the end, but that shouldn't be too hard to find out just by asking around.

An assortment of Yangzhou dishes began to cover the table as they talked. Chu Wanning felt like they had gone over all that they could with what they knew, so he stopped asking questions to look over the food lining the table instead. He paused for a moment before lifting his eyelids slightly to look at the person across from him, whose smile was just a tad nervous.

Chu Wanning asked: "Have you been to Jiangnan before?"

Of course Mo Ran had gone to see the apricot blossoms and misty rains of Jiangnan in his previous life, but he hadn't forgotten that he was only seventeen right now and only joined Sisheng Peak two-ish years ago, so he immediately shook his head: "Nope."

Chu Wanning's eyelashes lowered back down, expression neutral as he said in a clear voice: "But you ordered all the best dishes."

".....!!"

Only then did Mo Ran realize that he had ordered every single dish according to Chu Wanning's tastes. He was thinking only of making sure Chu Wanning eats well so that he can recover his strength, completely forgetting that he shouldn't be this familiar with these regional dishes.

"I worked in the kitchens of an entertainment house when I was young, so I've heard of these dishes even if I haven't had them before."

Luckily, Chu Wanning didn't press the issue: "Let's eat."

Seafood was a big part of Jiangnan dishes, especially here on the Rainbell Isle, where there were baskets full of crab and shrimp and strings of fish everywhere the eye could see, so the square beech table was naturally laden with seafood. Crispy fried eel with sauce poured over, sweet and sour squirrel fish crunchy on the outside and tender on the inside, steamed mantis shrimp, chrysanthemum sauteed sea snail, and braised silver carp. It smelled heavenly.

And aside from those, the meat and vegetable dishes, and the desserts as well, were just as exquisitely made and elegantly plated.

There was stewed crab meatballs, pork trotter aspic, shredded tofu simmered in chicken broth, soup dumplings, wensi tofu^[3], and more^[4].

With his cheek propped up in one hand, Mo Ran watched the waiter set down the last dish—osmanthus cake—then snuck a glance at Chu Wanning, wondering which dish he's gonna go for first.

He pondered for a minute, and secretly placed his bet:
Definitely the meatballs.

It's Chu Wanning's favorite Yangzhou dish, after all. And, sure enough, as soon as the dishes were all out, his chopsticks reached unhesitatingly over in that direction.

Mo Ran sighed to himself; this person is always so predictable, be it eating things or doing things, always the.....

Plop. An adorably plump meatball landed in Mo Ran's bowl.

.....same?

Mo Ran's head snapped up, the surprise from being favored so appearing slowly on his face: "Sh-shizun."

"Thanks for taking care of me these past few days."

Wait, did he hear that right? Mo Ran was bewildered.
Did Chu Wanning just thank him for taking care of him????

He had *never* said any such thing in the entirety of the last lifetime!!!!

Chu Wanning watched as the young man across from him slowly turned red, his eyebrows lifting and moving apart and his eyes getting rounder and rounder, a tuft of hair curling up from his head to sway happily back and forth. He didn't quite know how to react, but Chu-zongshi still had to preserve his dignity, so he took another lofty sip of tea.

Ow, his lips.....

Truth be told, during those days he spent by Mo Ran's side as Xia Sini, Chu Wanning had began to feel a little guilty. When he thought about it late at night, he had to admit that he really was too harsh of a person, and had been overly stern with Mo Ran. So he told himself that, when he gets back to normal, he won't carry on like that anymore, that he'll do better.

When he met with Xuanji at the Peach Blossom Springs, Chu Wanning had hemmed and hawed for a good long while before finally forcing the words past his lips to ask how to be less intimidating to disciples.

Xuanji was understandably taken aback before answering: "First, you have to actually show them that you care."

Show them that you care.....

Thinking that Mo Ran had probably never had the meatballs before, Chu Wanning parted his lips to explain: "Stewed crab meatballs are made with finely minced high-quality streaky pork, mixed with shrimp roe, crab meat, and crab roe and formed into meatballs. The meatballs are simmered in clear broth with bok choy, then finally arranged in a red clay pot for a colorful presentation."

"....."

Mo Ran was dumbfounded.

What's he reciting the menu for?

But Chu Wanning thought that patiently introducing new dishes to his disciple was a form of showing him care, and so in the course of the meal, Mo Ran tried every dish in turn and got an earful of descriptions that sounded like they came straight out of 《Jiangnan Recipes》.

If not for Chu Wanning's low, soothing voice, Mo Ran probably would've flipped the table and left.

"Hey hey, did you hear yet? Linyi Rufeng Sect won the last item at the Xuanyuan Pavilion auction!"

The private booths were divided by bamboo screens, and the people in the next booth over were a bit loud, their conversation drifting easily over to Mo Ran and Chu Wanning.

Chu Wanning abruptly stopped introducing "pork trotter aspic" to exchange a look with Mo Ran, and they both listened in with rapt attention.

A rough-sounding male voice was talking: "Of course I have, a holy weapon right? Three hundred million gold, paid on the spot. Aiyo that price, it was more gold than I've seen in my entire life."

"Sheesh, is that all you care about, don't you know that Rufeng Sect also spent fifty million gold on a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast!"

"Heavens, aren't those for eating or dual cultivating? Can't believe the biggest sect in the world would use such a reprehensible method of cultivation, and right out in the open too, how scandalous!"

"Actually, Su-xiong, using Beauty Feasts is a perfectly reasonable cultivation method, not some prohibited thing at all. They may look like us, but they're ultimately not human. It's no different from eating fairy fruits to advance your cultivation, so there's really nothing wrong with it when you get down to it."

"Hmph, we'll just have to agree to disagree....."

Someone else laughed lightly: "The one who bought the Beauty Feast is apparently some young disciple of Rufeng Sect who rarely comes out, a Ye something Xi. I heard he looks decent enough, wouldn't have expected some guy like that to rely on screwing women to cultivate. If you ask me, Rufeng Sect hasn't got long left."

Still another person chuckled: "What's wrong with that, who doesn't love a beauty?"

Then their conversation turned to roundabout debates on ethics and morality, nothing worth paying attention to.

Chu Wanning repeated quietly: "So Rufeng Sect bought the holy weapon?"

"Sounds like it."

Chu Wanning seemed troubled: "That makes things more difficult. We'll have to go to Rufeng Sect to investigate further....."

Mo Ran "ah"-ed as he remembered the issue, muttering: "Shizun used to be in Rufeng Sect."

"Mn."

"Don't wanna go back?"

Chu Wanning looked irritated at the mere mention of going back to Rufeng Sect, brows furrowing as he said: "They may be a famed sect in the upper cultivation world, but I once....."

Before he could finish, there was a sudden commotion over by the main hall. Someone was yelling loudly: "Innkeep, we'll give you five hundred gold, get rid of these people and clear this place out immediately, our young master is reserving the whole place today."

Author's Notes:

Crab, steamed mantis prawn, fish. All these descriptions came from Zheng Banqiao's collection; as these phrases aren't common usage, to avoid misunderstandings, I'm making it clear that these are not my original constructions and am stating where they came from.

Adding on what these people love and hate to eat the most:

Chu Wanning

Loves: Stewed crab meatball, lotus crisp

Hates: Mala [spicy and numbing] hotpot

Mo Ran

Loves: Chilli oil wontons

Hates: Salted beancurd

Xue Meng

Loves: Mala hotpot

Hates: Salted beancurd

Shi Mei

Loves: Saozimian [noodles with minced meat]

Hates: Tanghulu [candied hawthorn fruit]

Ye Wangxi

Loves: Sweet and sour fish

Hates: Fried pancake with spring onion filling

Mei Hanxue

Loves: Fish mint

Hates: Pork (This is very good, very halal)

Rufeng Sect's young master who will appear in the next chapter

Loves: All kinds of meat, especially pork (This is very not good, very not-halal)

Hates: Wensi tofu

So hungry...I'm escaping I'm escaping

Ch.85 This Venerable One Isn't Someone You Can Get Rid of so Easily with Just Fifteen Hundred Gold

The innkeeper's apologetic voice drifted over: "Goodness, my lord is so generous, five hundred just like that, this humble one is so flattered! But we really must be courteous to all our guests if we hope to keep doing business, so we can't just hustle everyone else out, you see. How about this, we have a spacious private room inside called the Guiwu Pavilion, it's reserved just for honored guests of means like yourself, let me show—"

She didn't even get to finish the sentence before there was a loud clattering of tables and chairs being overturned.

"What even is there to see! Who the hell cares about your Guiwu [Returning Fog] Pavilion or Wugui [Tortoise; also slang for cuckold] Pavilion——god damn, what kinda shitty name... don't want it! Get rid of them and we'll pay you a thousand!"

"Aw, but my lord looks like such a scholarly, reasonable person, surely he won't force such a difficult decision on this humble one, right?" The innkeep lied through her teeth without so much as batting an eye, simpering coyly, "There are really too many guests here already, if my lord dislikes Guiwu Pavilion, I can certainly offer another room, it's a little smaller but just as elegant, and I'll throw in an entertainment package with song and dance, free of charge, how's that?"

"No! Absolutely not! Fifteen hundred! Tell 'em all to get lost!" The boorish voice bellowed, "Quit dragging your feet! Our young master will be cross if the place isn't ready when he gets here!"

"Wow——" A thousand gold might be a lot to the average person, but it was a laughable amount to the once-emperor of the mortal realm—just the trinkets he used to casually throw at Song Qiutong to humor her were priceless treasures. And so his eyes were round with amusement as he chewed idly on his chopstick, laughing to Chu Wanning in a low voice, "Shizun Shizun, check it out, that dude thinks he can get rid of us with just fifteen hundred."

Chu Wanning shot him a glance, then lifted the bamboo curtain to look downstairs.

There was a crowd in the main hall. They were dressed in plain clothes that concealed their sect, but every one of them had a high-quality blade glinting at their waist and a faewolf slobbering by their side. The value of the blades were indeterminate, while the faewolves had a market price but were next to impossible to come by—getting just one was already no small feat for a minor sect; for these people to each have one, they were clearly from a prestigious sect.

All the guests stopped eating to stare apprehensively at them. It was so quiet inside the hall that one could hear a pin drop.

Suddenly, a white blur flashed into the inn, bright as snow. There was a beat of silence as everyone took in what it was, then a burst of frantic clamoring as all of them scrambled backwards away from it, with the more easily spooked people shrieking: "M-monster!!"

It was a snow-white faewolf, at least three people tall, eyes crimson as blood, coat glossy as satin, fangs the length of a grown man's arm glistening coldly.

But on that massive, vicious beast sat a handsome young man with an arrogant expression, casually reclined with one leg over the other. He was

dressed in a set of sleek hunting gear over scarlet raiments with gold-embroidered sleeves, and had on a silver helmet emblazoned with a lion swallowing the sun, a lock of red tassel hanging from its crown. His weapon, a jasper bow, laid over his knees.

As soon as those showy cultivators saw him, all of them dropped to one knee with hand pressed to their chest, saying in unison: "Greeting the young master!"

"Alright, already." The young man waved his hand, looking irritated, "Can't even take care of a little thing like this, greeting my ass!"

"Pfft." Mo Ran couldn't help laughing as he remarked quietly to Chu Wanning, "If they're greeting ass, then doesn't that make him the ass?"
"....."

The young man sitting stop the soft fur at the faewolf's nape looked cross indeed: "Where's the boss of this shabby place?"

The innkeeper was frightened, but still stepped up with forced calmness, smiling apologetically: "That wold be this humble one, my lord."

"Oh." He shot her a glance, "I'm going to stay here tonight, but I'm not used to having this many people around. Have a talk with them, I'll make up your losses."

"But my lord....."

"I know it puts you in a tough spot. Here, take this and give each table an apology on my behalf. And if anyone really doesn't want to leave, then just let them be." He tossed the innkeeper a pouch, and she opened it to find it filled with golden nine-turn returning pills—these pills allow the taker's cultivation to grow in leaps and bounds for ten days, and a single pill cost more than two thousand gold on the market. The innkeeper was shocked by this extravagant display at first, and then discreetly breathed a sigh of relief.

No cultivator would turn down something like this; with these pills, it would be perfectly acceptable to ask everyone to leave.

The innkeeper went around the tables apologizing and compensating, and the young man yawned before glaring down at his attendants: "The lot of you are all useless, do I really have to do everything myself."

The attendants looked at one another, then there was a scattering of ".....Gongzi is ever brilliant and indomitable."

The guests dispersed in short order; other than Chu Wanning and Mo Ran, who didn't care for money or cultivation pills, everyone else accepted the recompense and left with zero complaints to go stay elsewhere instead.

The innkeeper reported back: "Gongzi, everyone left, but two guests declined, saying it's already late and one of them is unwell, so they don't want to go elsewhere....."

"Nevermind them, no need to hassle an invalid." The young man waved his hand, unconcerned, "Long as they don't bother me."

Chu Wanning, the invalid: "....."

The innkeeper beamed and said warmly: "Gongzi is such a kind person. It's getting late, would Gongzi like to rest or have something to eat first?"

The young man replied: "I'm hungry. No need for rest, bring me a meal."

"Of course, my humble store will certainly bring Gongzi only the best. Our chef's signature dishes are crab [xie fen] metaball, pork trotter aspic....."

"Angry [also pronounced xie fen] meatball?" The young man was clearly not from the south and didn't much care for southern dishes. He blinked at the name of the dish, then waved his hand with a frown, "Pass, can't even understand these ridiculous names."

Maybe he was just some insanely rich merchant, and not a high-born young master after all.

Innkeep: ".....Then what would Gongzi like? We will do our utmost."

"Easy." The young man gestured at his attendants, "Five catties of beef for each of them, ten for me, and then a catty of soju and two legs of lamb. That'll do, just to tide us over, shouldn't eat too much late at night anyway."

Mo Ran: "Wow....."

He turned to Chu Wanning, thinking to make fun of the guy's bottomless appetite, only to find Chu Wanning staring fixedly at the young man with a hazy, indecipherable expression.

Mo Ran asked absently: "Shizun seems to know him?"

"Mn."

He was just offhandedly asking, and hadn't expected Chu Wanning to actually know him. Mo Ran tripped over his words in surprise: "Wha? Th-then who is he?"

"The only son of Rufeng Sect's leader." Chu Wanning said softly, "Nangong Si."

"....." No wonder Chu Wanning knew him, he used to be with Linyi Rufeng Sect after all, of course he would know what the sect leader's son looked like. And it was also no wonder that he himself didn't know the guy, since he was already dead from some illness when he was going around butchering Rufeng Sect in the previous lifetime.

Back then, he had thought that this son of the sect leader must've been some sickly cripple, but the guy in front of him now was healthy, lively, and had ego to spare.

.....How could a guy like this die of illness? Some kind of sudden plague maybe?

Downstairs, Nangong Si was digging in happily, inhaling all ten catties of beef and both legs of lamb in no time at all, and gulping down no few bowls of wine on top. Mo Ran watched speechlessly from upstairs.

"Shizun, isn't Rufeng Sect all about refinement and stuff? What's up with their young master then? He's even less proper than our Xue Mengmeng."

Chu Wanning shoved his head away from where it had nosed over, even though his own face was still turned to peer at the scene downstairs: "Don't just make up nicknames for your fellow disciples as you like."

Mo Ran laughed 'hehe' and was just about to say something else when he paused, suddenly realizing something. Chu Wanning's finger was pressed against his forehead, pushing him away, his sleeve draping softly over his face like a wisp of mist in the process; it was made of some kind of extremely light material, like silk or satin but not quite, and felt both warm and cool, almost like water.

Back in the room earlier, when he was reeling with desire and couldn't get Chu Wanning's robes off, he thought it was just on too tight.

But looking carefully at it now, Mo Ran discovered that the robes were actually made of "frozen mist silk" from Kunlun Taxue Palace.

Kunlun Taxue Palace was the most aloof and detached sect in the upper cultivation realm; its disciples were inducted at five, and were sent into secluded cultivation in the sacred land of Kunlun one year later, where they must stay until they manage to cultivate their spiritual cores. Although spiritual core was innate and the cultivation was just to awaken it, it was still a long process that often took ten to fifteen years. Since others were barred entry during this time, the disciples' needs became a problem—food was one thing, since the sacred land was adjacent the Wangmu Lake so the Taxue Palace disciples could always go fishing for food, but it's not like they could just weave their own clothes.

And so the "frozen mist silk" was created.

Clothes made from this silk were not only light as mist, they were also naturally enchanted to be unstainable by common dust and grime so as to not need washing unless splashed by things like blood.

But the most amazing property of this silk was its ability to morph in accordance with the wearer's body, which was absolutely necessary for the disciples of Taxue Palace who enter the sacred land as small children at five, and couldn't leave until they were young adults of fifteen or twenty. Clothes made of "frozen mist silk" would grow with them so that they have fitting clothes during those long years.

——But what was Chu Wanning doing wearing robes made of this special material?

Mo Ran squinted, a spark flashing through his mind. He suddenly felt like something was off, like he had been mistaken about something from the very start, but what was it.....

"Excuse me, may I ask where the innkeeper is?"

Mo Ran's thoughts were interrupted by a confident yet friendly and courteous voice.

He looked down to see the group Rufeng Sect disciples that were at Xuanyuan Pavilion earlier. The one at their lead was leaning halfway inside, heron-patterned mantle lightly adrift as he held the door curtain open with his sword.

"Aren't they Ye Wangxi's people?" Mo Ran perked up immediately.

Rufeng Sect had seventy two cities, so its disciples often didn't even know one another, and Nangong Si was sitting by himself in a private room with his back to the door, so the group of newcomers glanced over their fellow disciples of the same sect inside the inn, dressed in plain clothes, and didn't recognize any of them.

Ye Wangxi vs Nangong Si, this was sure to be entertaining.

"My apologies, but we've already been reserved for tonight." The innkeeper hurried over while silently cursing herself for forgetting to close shop, "Please look elsewhere, we're truly so sorry."

The young man at the lead looked troubled: "Sigh, what to do...we've already checked the other inns, they're all full up. There's a frail young lady with us who's in dire need of some rest, so we were hoping to find somewhere for her to get a good night's sleep. May I trouble you to ask if the one who reserved this inn would consider letting us have a few rooms?"

"That..... he probably won't be willing."

The young man bowed and implored politely: "Please ask anyway. It's alright if he's unwilling."

The innkeeper didn't even get a chance to respond when one of Nangong Si's attendants at a table nearby slapped the table and stood up in a rage: "What is there to ask! Get out, out! Don't disturb our young master while he's eating!"

"That's right! Aren't you embarrassed, taking a woman to bed while wearing Rufeng Sect's uniform, dragging your sect name through the mud!"

The young man hadn't expected such a misunderstanding, turning bright red as he said indignantly: "Why do you slander us so? We of Rufeng Sect have always been principled and virtuous, of course we wouldn't conduct any such impropriety. This young lady was kindly saved by our young master, how dare you speak such nonsense?"

"Your young master?" Nangong Si's attendant glanced toward the private room, and, seeing that his young master was still drinking his wine, taking no notice of them, took it as silent permission to chase them out, so he relaxed and snickered loudly, "Everyone knows there's only one young master of Rufeng Sect, so I wonder who this young master of yours is?"

"That would be me, Ye Wangxi of Rufeng Sect." A gentle, graceful voice sounded from outside the door.

Every head in the room turned toward the door: "Ye-gongzi——"

Ye Wangxi was dressed in all black, his handsome face taking on a note of delicacy in the candle light. He stepped inside, followed by a veiled woman with nervous eyes—Song Qiutong.

"....." The vein at Mo Ran's temple throbbed viciously at the mere sight of her.

Her again. Just his luck.....

Nangong Si's attendants were momentarily taken aback by Ye Wangxi's appearance, then contempt surfaced on the faces of some of the less-composed ones.

Ye Wangxi was the adopted son of Rufeng Sect's chief elder, and used to be attached to the the sect's "shadow city." As implied by the name, the shadow city specialized in training the shadow guard^[5]. The leader of Rufeng Sect was originally having him trained to be the next leader of the shadow guard, but his cultivation nature turned out to be unsuitable for the cultivation method of the shadow guard, so he was reassigned to the main city and now acted as the sect leader's right-hand man.

Due to his upbringing as a shadow guard, Ye Wangxi habitually kept a low profile, and very few people knew of him. However, the sect leader regarded him extremely highly, so much so that, in recent years, there had even been rumors within the sect that Ye Wangxi was actually the sect leader's bastard child. Perhaps because of this, Nangong Si, the legitimate heir, was on bad terms with Ye Wangxi.

Since their young master disliked him, it was only natural that the attendants had low opinions of him as well.

They were junior to Ye-gongzi and technically shouldn't offend him, but they were Nangong Si's personal attendants and reported directly to him, so after a long moment of awkward, frozen silence, a less reserved one of the attendants laughed coldly and said: "Well, Ye-gongzi, please take your leave, I'm afraid there's no place for you here."

"Gongzi, since they already said there's no space, I-let's go look elsewhere." Song Qiutong tugged at the hem of Ye Wangxi's clothes with slender fingers, a note of fright in her voice, "And this place is so expensive, I dare not waste any more of Gongzi's money....."

Upstairs, Mo Ran rolled his eyes—it's always that weak, pitiful-sounding tone with her; she had tricked him with it back then, and now she was tricking Ye Wangxi the same way.

Ye Wangxi was just about to speak when an enormous white shadow darted out from the inner room, headed straight for Ye Wangxi's back.

Song Qiutong called out in alarm: "Gongzi watch out!!!"

"Awooooooh! Woooooh!!!"

Howling loudly, a snow white faewolf bolted to Ye Wangxi and started running circles around him excitedly.

"....."

Everyone was silent.

Ye Wangxi looked down at the three-people-tall faewolf that was currently rolling around on the floor stickily, surprised: "Naobaijin?"

It was Nangong Si's faewolf mount, named Naobaijin [cornelian platinum/white-gold] for its scarlet eyes the color of cornelian, its coat white as snow, and the gold of its claws.

If Naobaijin was here, then so was Nangong Si. Ye Wangxi obliged the big furry head that was nudging over for pats while looking around.

Shaa—

The bamboo curtain was lifted by a hand extending from a scarlet, gold-embroidered sleeve.

Leaning idly against the wall of the private room with his arms crossed, irritated expression half-covered by the bamboo curtain, and still holding a bottle of wine in hand, Nangong Si shot Ye Wangxi a glance and sneered: "Interesting, why do you always show up wherever I go? With the way you're always trailing after me, where am I to put my face if people start gossiping about us?"

Author's Notes:

Wolf cub: I'll give you five hundred, leave.

Pupper: No.

Wolf cub: I'll give you a thousand, leave!

Pupper: No!

Wolf cub: I'll give you a thousand five hundred! Are you going to leave!

Pupper: In my previous life, this entire world was this venerable one's, you can shut it, you short-lived bastard!

Wolf cub: You dare insult me! *&#! &* Awoo!!!!!!

Pupper: Woof woof arf arf arf!!

Lady boss: 'Ello? Animal Control? There are two rabid dogs fighting in my shop, yes, one's a husky, another's an Alaskan...yes, yes, yes, that Alaskan is also carrying a Samoyed called Naobaijin...yes, all three look like they've never gotten their rabies shot, very dangerous...

“.....” Ye Wangxi choked visibly at his words, but didn’t get mad, instead taking a moment to gather his bearings before saying, “You misunderstood. I’m here on the sect leader’s orders to buy something from Xuanyuan Pavilion, not following you”

Mo Ran and Chu Wanning exchanged a glance.
——The holy weapon.

Nangong Si swung the jar of wine danging from his hand, his face darkening even more: “So my Father’s asking you to fetch his things for him now, huh? What, do I have no hands or no legs that I can’t do it for him?”

“.....A-Si, that’s not what I meant.”

“Who said you could call me that?” Nangong Si lowered his brows in a scowl, lightning crackling in his eyes, “Ye-gongzi, don’t think you can be so impudent with me just because Father is blind enough to be friendly with you..... aren’t you disgusted of yourself?”

“I call you so at the sect leader’s behest. If you dislike it, you can bring it up with him.” Ye Wangxi paused for a few moments, then said, “What’s the point in taking it out on me.”

“Don’t you use my Father against me!”

Nangong Si drew in a breath and forced himself to calm down. There was a cold light in his dark eyes, like a silvery moon in a night sky saturated with beacon smoke.

“Ye-gongzi.” He seemed to be dragging the word out, “I’m afraid that Father told you to call me A-Si because he has certain misconceptions about your position in the sect, but I’d advise you to know your place. Don’t take a mile just because you were given an inch—after all, no matter what kind of facade you put on, you’ll never be my equal by reason of your birth alone.”

A hint of something dark seemed to flash across Ye Wangxi’s refined features. He lowered his thick curtain of lashes and said, quietly: “The young master is right, but I.....have never once thought to be the young master’s equal.”

The change in the form of address made him feel a bit better. Nangong Si lifted the jar and downed some of its contents; the wine burned its way down his throat, but he always could hold his liquor. He stared at Ye Wangxi for a while longer, then scoffed and waved a hand: “That’s what I thought. Just look at the way you are now, how could you possibly even.....”

He caught himself before letting slip something he shouldn’t in public and abruptly pressed his lips together, saying no more.

“.....”

As for Ye Wangxi, even after being humiliated and insulted so, his lashes were still lowered, and no one could see if it was anger or indignation in his eyes. He gave the onlookers nothing beyond a calm, gentle face, dauntless yet reserved.

The atmosphere was uneasy to the extreme.

Nangong Si looked around awkwardly for a bit before his gaze landed on the woman behind Ye Wangxi. As if to cover up the near blunder just now, he cleared his throat and tipped his chin toward the woman, asking: “Someone you saved?”

“Mn.”

“Where’s she even from? Don’t just go bailing out random people.”

"It's alright, she's from Xuanyuan Pavilion's auction."

Nangongsi had no interest in the auction, nor did he waste any energy looking into it, but he couldn't help his surprise at hearing that Song Qiutong was bought from there. His originally unconcerned gaze becoming sharp all of a sudden as he stared at Song Qiutong's face for a while before saying: "So is this thing a Slave-Boned, or a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast?"

In the cultivation world, only two types of people could be openly bought and sold: Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts, and the Slave-Boned.

The Slave-Boned are those born of the union between humans and demons. People fear the demonic nature of such crossbreeds, so once they're found out, their vital energy is destroyed and a curse is used to put a slave mark on the bone of their shoulder blades, and they are henceforth condemned to servitude.

But the Slave-Boned don't go for much and are by no means rare; they usually just end up being either servants of the big sects or playthings of the rich and powerful. Xuanyuan Pavilion wouldn't even bother auctioning some run-of-the-mill thing like that.

Sure enough, Ye Wangxi replied: "Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast."

Nangong Si, suddenly interested, walked past Ye Wangxi to look at Song Qiutong, circling around her like he was inspecting merchandise. He frowned: "What's wrong with its leg? Is it defective or something?"

".....She was injured when they captured her. We applied a salve, it's healing." Ye Wangxi paused, "That's why we can't walk around too much and were hoping to stay here tonight."

Nangong Si said nothing, only narrowing his eyes before suddenly diving down to the side of Song Qiutong's neck and taking a big whiff like some feral wolf. The lecher-like move frightened her so much she paled instantly, frozen in place clutching her clothes like she's about to faint.

"Doesn't smell any different from normal people." He rubbed his nose and sneezed, "And some kinda perfume powder....."

Waving his hand, Nangong Si asked offhandedly: "How much?"

"Fifty million."

"Silver?"

"Gold."

Nangong Si's eyes shot wide open: "Ye Wangxi are you crazy? Do you know how many top-grade whetstones that is? And you fucking buy a *woman* to bring back to me? What, is Rufeng Sect's money not money to you?"

"I didn't use the sect's money." Ye Wangxi paused for a moment, then continued, "And I didn't buy her for you."

"You——!" The anger that had only just subsided roared right back to life, and Nangong Si snarled, "I see how it is!" He turned to glare at Song Qiutong, getting more irritated the more he looked, and that veil just straight-up pissed him off, so he ordered, "You, take that shitty rag off your face!"

Song Qiutong, spooked, clutched tightly at Ye Wangxi's sleeve, shrinking behind him and saying in a pitiful voice: "Ye-gongzi, I.....I don't want to....."

Ye Wangxi's slender figure wasn't as tall or muscular as Nangong Si, but there was no fear in his eyes as he tilted his head up slightly to look at the other: "Young master, since she doesn't want to, just let her be."

"You talk too much. You saved her, so she owes Rufeng Sect her life, and that means she has to listen to me. Take it off!"

"I saved her, yes, but the moment I did, I also set her free." Ye Wangxi said, "So please don't force her, young master."

"Ye Wangxi! What the hell!" Nangong Si punched the door frame in anger, "What do you take me for? You just really gotta go against me huh? If I tell her to take it off then she damn well better take it off. I'll let you guys stay if she takes the damn thing off, else get the fuck out!"

Ye Wangxi only sighed almost imperceptibly before turning to Song Qiutong: "Let's leave."

This time Nangong Si wasn't the only one to choke; Ye Wangxi had the holy weapon with him, there's no way they could let him go just like this. Chu Wanning immediately said: "Go stop him."

"Ok ok." Mo Ran was just thinking the same thing anyway, but then he suddenly paused, "Shizun, where would he sleep though?"

"He can have half of our room."

".....Uh." Mo Ran looked uneasy for some reason, "That's probably not a good idea."

Chu Wanning gaze flicked upward slightly: "Why not?"

"There are some things Shizun doesn't know about, but it's best if we don't stay in the same room as him. Besides, he won't agree to it anyway, since he's actually....."

He was just getting to the important part when he was interrupted by the sound of Nangong Si kicking over a table downstairs, cups and dishes clattering to the floor, then a screech as he dragged a bench over and put his foot on it, bellowing: "Who said you could just leave?! What are you, revolting or some shit? Get back here!"

"....." Even Nangong Si's attendants looked awkward now.
Young master.....wasn't it you who just told them to get out?

But Ye Wangxi seemed long-used to Nangong Si's unreasonable temper fits, pretending not to have heard anything as he tapped Song Qiutong on the shoulder and gestured at her to ignore the crazy person behind them.

"Ye Wangxi!"

"....."

"Ye Wangxi!!!!"

"....."

"YE——WANG——XI!!!!!!!"

The vein at Ye Wangxi's temple twitched and he looked back despite himself, only to be unexpectedly met with an oncoming wine jar hurtling directly toward

him. Pupils contracting, he was just about to dodge when a blur of white flashed in front of him.

"AH——!"

A delicate voice cried out in pain, startling everyone in the room, especially Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si.

Song Qiutong had blocked the hit for Ye Wangxi in the nick of time, and was bleeding profusely where the heavy jar of red clay had hit her on the forehead. She touched the blood with a trembling hand fair as jade, and tears of pain immediately began to fall.

"Don't touch it; let me see."

"I'm okay, as long as Gongzi didn't get injured....."

"Can't you talk without throwing things?" Ye Wangxi said in a sullen tone, shooting Nangong Si a blame-laden glare before turning to his own attendant, "Get the Jinchuang medicine^[6]."

"Gongzi, we ran out." The attendant said quietly, "Should I go buy some?"

Nangong Si hadn't expected this to happen either; he forced himself to remain calm, but there was a bit of guilt in his eyes. He mumbled with a stiff expression: "I, I have some..... A-Lan, fetch my medicine bag."

Ye Wangxi, still angry, pressed his lips into a thin line and ignored him.

Nangong Si stood there stiffly holding the little bottle of medicine for a good while, but Ye Wangxi didn't so much as glance at him the entire time. He couldn't let down his pride, so he shoved the bottle roughly at Song Qiutong instead: "Here, use it if you want, I don't care."

Song Qiutong was like a frightened little deer, first looking shakily toward Ye Wangxi, only accepting the medicine when she saw that he was silent but did not stop her, and then even lowered her head in a bow to the person who had injured her, saying quietly: "Thank you, Nangong-gongzi."

Not having expected the girl whose skull he had nearly cracked to thank him, Nangong Si was taken aback for a second before quickly snapping out of it and waving a hand with an awkward cough: "No problem."

That night, Ye Wangxi's group ended up staying at the inn after all.

A multitude of candles flickered in the inn like a scattering of stars in the sky.

Mo Ran sat by the window with his cheek propped up and his thoughts wandering. It had been nearly two years since his rebirth, and so many things have happened quite differently from how they had in the last lifetime; it was strange, watching the same people do different things.

Song Qiutong, Ye Wangxi, Bu'gui.....

With the passing of time, these familiar people and object from his past life had once again reappeared in this life. Only this time, he absolutely will not take Song Qiutong to be his wife again. As for Ye Wangxi, his name will soon resound throughout the cultivation world, second to none but Chu Wanning.

And then there was Bu'gui.

Agitation flooded his chest when he thought about the long blade that had accompanied him through his previous life.

"Shizun."

"Yes?"

"You've been drawing that talisman for an hour already, isn't it done yet?"

"Almost." Chu Wanning said. By the dim light of the candle, he carefully put down the finishing strokes with a brush dipped in cinnabar to reveal a vivid, elaborate drawing of a soaring dragon.

Mo Ran shuffled over to look.

"What's that?"

"Rising Dragon Array." Chu Wanning answered.

"What does it do?"

"It can detect all spells in the area, big or small. If our mysterious person intends to use the holy weapon to test for spiritual essence, there is sure to be some kind of trace left on the weapon. This way, we'll know if the weapon's appearance was mere coincidence or part of his plan."

"Wow, neat. But then why didn't Shizun use this back at Xuanyuan Pavilion?"

".....You'll understand once I awaken it."

Chu Wanning pricked his finger and brushed the blood across one of the dragon's scales. The little dragon on the paper instantly began to glow golden, its eyes and tail moving around nimbly.

Chu Wanning spoke: "Are you a real dragon?"

A squeaky voice came from the paper: "Yup yup, this Venerable One is a real dragon."

"Prove it."

"Stupid mortal! What's there to doubt!"

"I'll know you to be a real dragon if you can jump out of the page."

"What's so hard about that! Just give this Venerable One a quick sec! Hah!"

There was a flash of golden light, and a mighty little dragon the size of the palm leaped out the paper, wiggling its body and baring its fangs, and flew a circle around Chu Wanning, quite pleased with itself, making a ruckus as it boasted: "Hahaha, hahaha, I'm a dragon big and real, big and real, I know lots of secrets, lots of secrets, but I'm not gonna tell you, not gonna tell you, not, gonna, tell, you!"

Chu Wanning's eyes, clear as an icy lake, swept coldly over the little eel before covering it under a cupped hand and turning to Mo Ran with a deadpan face: "You see?"

"I see....."

"Let go! You stupid mortal! You're messing up this Venerable One's whiskies!"

Chu Wanning lifted his hand and poked curtly at the blood-colored scale at its throat: "Shut up and get to work."

Author's Notes:

Nangong Si

Courtesy name: Wuju
Nickname: None
Occupation: The heir of Rufeng Sect
To put it simply: An officialling
Social Appearance: A youthful, handsome talent of the upper cultivation realm who leads hordes of fans
To put it simply: A gangster with a bunch of underlings
Current favourite: Naobaijin
Favourite food: Pork ribs
Dislike: Vegetables
Height: 185cm

Ch.87 This Venerable One Doesn't Want You to Take Any More Disciples

The little dragon went and returned like the wind, zooming back in through the window only ten minutes later to holler: "I got it, I got it, so many magic traces in this inn, wahahaha!"

"Hey lil' eel, what are you, afraid the neighbors won't hear? Yell louder." Leaning on the table, Mo Ran extended a finger and stroked the little dragon's body. Its tail swung over with a woosh to smack his hand, but didn't hurt at all, only tickled instead—it was made of paper, after all.

"Don't touch this Venerable One, you annoying prettyboy! This Venerable One has yet to take a wife, can't just let you cop a feel like that!"

Mo Ran burst out laughing: "Wait what now? A paper dragon like you wants a wife?"

"Wha——! Puh puh puh! Who're you calling paper! You damn mutt!"

"Huh, how come even you call me that? Is your surname Xue or something?"

"Xue? Hmph, idiot brat, this Venerable One is the Dragon of the Candle, mighty and unmatched, splitting the heavens and cleaving the earth, day and night as I open and close mine eyes, summer and winter with the draw of mine breath! My name is Zhu Jiuyin, and don't you forget it!"

".....Yeeeah, didn't get a word of that."

"Wayayaya!" The little dragon did cartwheels in anger, smashing into the candlestick with its little head the width of two fingers, making the flame flicker and the wax sway. Mo Ran hurriedly went to steady the candle, but the little dragon bit his hand as soon as he reached out, not that it felt like much of anything, being paper and all. Zhu Jiuyin got picked it up by the tail and flung to the side by Mo Ran, going splat against the collars of Chu Wanning's robes and drooping glumly there.

"Chu Wanning." The little dragon lifted one of its whiskies and prodded him weakly, "That mangy mutt hit me."

Chu Wanning didn't even feel like wasting any breath on it, peeling it off himself and casually slapping it onto the table: "What spells did you find?"

"Hmph hmph, you gotta call this Venerable One 'Dragon-Taizi' three times first, then——"

Chu Wanning pinned it with a cold glare: "Speak."

“.....”

The little dragon bloated with anger at the disrespect, its whiskers pointing straight up as it glared at Chu Wanning with its beady little eyes, that venerable mouth of its hanging half open, huffing and puffing until it heaved up a gush of ink.

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes: “Waste any more ink and I will set you on fire.” He reached for its tail as if to dangle it over the fire, “Then you’ll be a real candle dragon.”

“Alright alright alright! You win! You win! I’ll tell you! I’ll tell you alright? Jeez!”

The little dragon spit a couple more times, sending some more ink splattering while muttering not-at-all-discreetly: “So damn mean, no wonder I never see no wife, even after all these years!”

“Eh?” Mo Ran blinked and snuck a glance at Chu Wanning, grinning cheekily, “Didn’t Shizun say something about a Shiniang?”

“.....” Chu Wanning ignored him, sword brows lowering as he snapped at the little dragon, “Less talking, more writing!”

“Hmph! Stinky man!”

Plopping onto the writing paper laid out on the table, the little dragon gathered ink in its claw using magic and began to scrawl messily on the page, muttering the whole time.

It couldn’t be helped that it couldn’t simply name the spells that it saw——there was a limit to how much information a brain of paper could process, after all, it’d be too much to expect it to figure out what the spells were based on the leftover magical traces, so it could only draw them out. Luckily, Chu Wanning was more than capable of discerning the original spells, watching the little dragon scrawling along with lowered lashes and naming them as he went.

The little dragon drew a wanling moon.

Chu Wanning: “Soothing spell. Someone here has insomnia.”

The little dragon drew the seven stars of the Big Dipper.

“Celestial defense array. Someone has defenses set up.”

The little dragon drew a rouge box.

“.....radianc countenance spell.”

“Pfft,” Mo Ran laughed, raising his hand to say: “I know this one! A simple beautification and skin care spell that girls use at night; probably that Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast?”

Chu Wanning didn’t comment, seeming a bit agitated that every spell so far has been irrelevant and inconsequential. He furrowed his brows and tapped a slender finger against the table: “Next.”

The little dragon drew a heart.

Mo Ran wondered: “What’s this?”

“Heart-clearing spell.” Chu Wanning said, frustrated, “It’s unimportant. Someone’s meditating, is all. Next.”

The little dragon drew a dog head, all crooked.

“.....Beast-taming spell.....” Chu Wanning put a hand to his brow, “You, pick the important spells to draw. Skip the trivial ones for cosmetics and playing with dogs and helping people sleep and whatnot. Next.”

The little dragon looked up and fumed: “Well aren’t you picky!”

“Draw!”

Out of fear of getting tossed into the candle flame and becoming a real “candle dragon”, the little paper dragon could only huffily wipe its little claws across the paper again, this time drawing an extremely complicated, mysterious-looking array.

“Looks like two circles, with a cross, and then a vertical line straight down, some kind of Yin-Yang Divination looking thing?” Mo Ran’s eyes opened wide, “Shizun, could this be what our guy put on the weapon.....”

“No.” Chu Wanning only took one glance and he could already feel a headache coming on, “Sound-changing spell.”

“Oh? What’s it for?”

“Some people want to change their own voice, either because they dislike it or else out of some other necessity. This sound-changing spell lets them do that, it’s not a difficult spell.” Chu Wanning paused, then said, “But it damages the throat if used for an extended period of time, such that it’s very difficult to go back to the original voice.....There’s something unusual about this spell, I wonder who’s using it.”

But Mo Ran only grinned: “Ah, so that’s what it’s for. Makes sense then.”

Chu Wanning sighed and was just about to move on when he paused, eyes flickering as if realizing something, and turned abruptly to look at Mo Ran.

“What do you mean it makes sense.....do you know something?”

“What could I possibly know? I was just thinking it’s pretty normal for someone to dislike their own voice. Who knows, maybe it’s that Song girl, maybe her voice is actually hoarse and grating, and she wanted to make it sound sweeter?”

“.....” Chu Wanning smoothed down his sleeve, “Thinking about nonsense all day.” Then he turned back to the little dragon: “Next.”

The little dragon drew another heart.

Mo Ran: “Oi, didn’t Shizun just tell you to skip things like heart-clearing spells?”

“Puh, what do you know, brat.” The little dragon shot him a seething glare, then suddenly smacked its tail onto the paper, putting an inky blotch on the heart and then proceeding to spread it around until the entire heart was colored black.

“What’s this? Black-hearted spell?”

Chu Wanning seemed a little awkward, and was silent for a while before saying: “No. It should be an affection spell.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s similar to the Xuanyuan Pavilion’s pill of obsessive affection.” Chu Wanning answered, “It bewitches a person to develop feelings of love and affection toward the caster, things like that. Generally used by women.”

Mo Ran opened his eyes wide: “No way? Could it be that Song Qiuting.....”

“How would i know about such things.” Chu Wanning seemed irate, flinging his broad sleeve and saying, “Other people’s love affairs are none of my business, why would I care who’s messing around with whom.”

“But Chu Wanning ah, are you sure you don’t care about this affection spell?” The little dragon said gleefully, tail swaying this way and that, “This one’s pretty

interesting if you ask me, if you're willing to call me Dragon-Taizi three times, then I'll.....”

Chu Wanning looked down at it with murder in his eyes: “Shut up and draw the next one.”

“Hmph! You’ll regret this!”

“Are you going to draw or not?”

But the little dragon stopped drawing, sitting down with a plop and scratching its belly with its little claw.

Chu Wanning said coldly: “What, out of ink?”

“Idiot, out of spells.” The little dragon rolled its eyes, “I’ve drawn so many already, and it’s still not enough for you? There’s no more, that’s all there is, this inn is perfectly clean aside from these.”

Both Chu Wanning and Mo Ran’s expressions shifted slightly. Mo Ran asked: “That’s it?”

“That’s it.”

Chu Wanning: “There isn’t one for assessing spiritual foundations?”

“Nope.”

The master and disciple exchanged a glance, disbelief written on both of their faces. If the mysterious person was using the auction to find another spiritual essence, then he *must* have put some kind of assessment spell on the holy weapon, but now it appeared that the holy weapon had no spell at all on it — were they mistaken then? Did the long blade’s appearance have nothing to do with the mysterious person?

Noting their silence, the little dragon soared into mid air and flew around left and right, whining: “Oi, pay attention to this Venerable One, drawing is exhausting you know! Where’s this Venerable One’s round of applause?”

Chu Wanning was already irritated to begin with; at its hollering, he simply lifted a hand with a sweep of his sleeve and summoned a yellow talisman in the air. The little dragon shrieked miserably at the very sight of it, yelling: “I don’t wanna I don’t wanna I don’t wanna I don’t wanna!!!!” But got sucked into the talisman anyway, turning back into a drawing. A tap of Chu Wanning’s fingertip, and the drawing itself also faded slowly away.

It kept squeezing its eyes in affront at Chu Wanning even as it was disappearing.

Chu Wanning said: “I’ll call you when you’re needed.”

Tears streamed down the little dragon’s face: “You only ever remember me when you have need of me! Chu Wanning, you’re heartless.....”

“Get lost already!” Chu Wanning was originally still being civil to it, but his brows dipped in anger at these words and he folded the talisman flat in half with an unceremonious slap of his hand before tucking it back into his sleeve.

Nighttime. Chu Wanning slept on the bed, Mo Ran took the floor.

Both troubled with worries.

They hadn’t expected the holy weapon to be free of any spells whatsoever. Did the mysterious person have some way of gauging spiritual foundation that

they didn't know about, or was he just not in a hurry to find a replacement with strong spiritual energy?

"Mo Ran."

He called to him in the darkness.

Mo Ran responded reflexively with a "Hm?"

"Let's go back to Sisheng Peak tomorrow."

Mo Ran's eyes opened.

"Huh?"

"If that person would let an opportunity like the Xuanyuan auction just slip past, then he probably already has some other method of searching. I'm afraid we won't find out much just carrying on like this. So let's go back to Sisheng Peak first, I'll have the sect leader message the other nine great sects in secret to check for any spiritual essences within their own sects, and to safeguard any that they find. Better than sitting on our hands hoping he just happens to show up."

"Will that be okay? What if the mysterious person is one of the sect leaders?"

"That's very unlikely, but it doesn't matter even if he is. He already knows we're after him anyway."

"But how will Shizun make all those sect leaders listen to uncle?" Mo Ran asked, puzzled, "Tell them everything?"

"That's not necessary, and they might not believe it anyway." Chu Wanning replied mildly, "I have my ways."

Mo Ran asked: "Which is?"

"I'll take disciples."

"!!!!"

"I'll have the sect leader tell the other sects that the frequent breaches in the ghost realm barrier poses a great danger to all, and that Yuheng of Sisheng Peak intends to accept up to five additional disciples to train in the use of techniques such as the Shangqing Barrier and the Shisha Barrier." Chu Wanning said quietly, "Those sects have tried time and again to invite me to teach, specifically for these barrier techniques. If I put out the word that I'm willing to impart these techniques, they'll come. And, since I accept only those with outstanding spiritual foundations, they'll have to test all of their disciples to select the candidates, thereby fulfilling our goal."

But Mo Ran didn't reply, his face going pale in the darkness: "Y-you're going to take more disciples?"

"If fate would have it."

Chu Wanning rolled over, his voice quietening as if getting tired.

"I'll take the names of the candidates and have them practice standard barrier techniques by themselves first. If any among them manage to persevere for three years or so, then why not....."

In the darkness, listening to the voice from the bed slowly drifting off, Mo Ran felt like a jar of vinegar had been spilled in his chest, so sour it made his heart ache.

Take on more disciples?

You only ever took three in the last lifetime, picky as you are, how come you're not being picky now? How could you take on more disciples just like that!

He kept wanting to say something to him, but every time the words got to his lips, they never got past.

Chu Wanning fell asleep, blissfully unaware of the sea of vinegar raging within Mo Ran.

It was cold at night. Mo Ran pulled on an outer garment and go up, calling to Chu Wanning in a low voice a couple of times to make sure he was really asleep, then quietly opened the door and snuck out of the room.

The halls of the inn were still and silent. A few red silk lanterns glowed peacefully with a low light, gentle circles of orange reflecting on the wooden floor like so many ripples.

Chu Wanning may have already tested the holy weapon.
But Mo Ran had yet to test his Bu'gui.

A holy weapon within a hundred feet of its master could be called to his side with a simple spell. Mo Ran didn't get a chance to check if it really was his weapon from the past life back at Xuanyuan Pavilion, how could he possibly miss this chance now?

His fingertip glowed with a crimson light.
Lowering his eyelashes, Mo Ran said in a low voice: "Bu'gui, come!"

There was nothing but silence for a few moments, but then the muffled sound of a blade rang out suddenly from somewhere in the distance. The sound was barely audible but it reverberated in his ears, hammering his heart.

Mo Ran's eyes shot open: "Bu'gui!"

It was Bu'gui. The long blade was struggling, crying blood, its deep roar racing to him across oceans of blood, across lifetimes. It was as if he could *hear* Bu'gui weeping and crying for him, but it was trapped, confined by something Mo Ran knew nothing of.

It could feel its master's call but could not answer. There was something missing, something severing their connection.

But they once had a pact, once saw the beautiful sights from the tallest mountains together, and once waited for death together, in the scent of the last remaining bit of warmth at Wushan Palace.

There was something forcing them apart, but still their bonds remained, like tendons linking torn flesh.

Mo Ran's eyes were red and welling with tears, whispering: "Bu'gui....."
It's you.
Why can't you return to my side.
Who's stopping you.
Wh.....

Creak.
The quiet sound of a door opening.
But in this suffocating darkness, it was loud as the crash of thunder.

Author's Notes:

Shizun: Wishing everyone a happy Christmas Eve

Dog: Have a prosperous Year of the Cock!

Peacock: What nonsense is the one upstairs talking about! I'll wish everyone here an early Happy New Year!

Shi Mei: It's not Christmas yet, so I'll say Merry Christmas first~

Wolf cub: Wishing everyone a joyous Year of the Dog with Naobaijin!
Ye Wangxi: Why do I feel like "joyous Year of the Dog" sounds like cussing someone out...

Mei Hanxue: Wishing everyone that they have a beauty to accompany them every day ^_^

Little Paper Dragon: Look for Zhong Wu Yan when you have problems, and run to Xia Ying Chun when you have none! Chu Wanning, you shallow-hearted man! Let me out now!!

Ch.88 This Venerable One Meets Another Reborn Person

His head snapped up to look in the direction the sound had come from.

A person in a floor-length, gold-patterned black cloak appeared at the end of the hall. His figure was tall and straight, and his entire body was covered under cloth—even his face was shrouded behind a curtain of black silk. All that was visible was a pair of eyes, but the darkness made it hard to see even those eyes clearly.

The person held a blade in his hand.

A narrow blade, completely black, unmatched in sharpness.

Bu'gui.

"Who are you!"

"It doesn't matter who I am." The person said coldly; his voice sounded strangely warped, as if it had been intentionally distorted, "All you need to know is that I know who you are."

A chill ran through Mo Ran, but he forced himself to stay calm.

"I'm just a disciple of Sisheng Peak, so what if you know me, what's your point?"

"A disciple of Sisheng Peak? Heh, that's not wrong, but have you forgotten that you're also Taxian-Jun, Emperor of the Mortal Realm, a vicious ghost that slew his teacher and spit on decency, a soul that fled the road to the underworld?"

Mo Ran's blood grew colder with every word.

He felt like he had fallen into a frozen cave.

Taxian-Jun.

Who bathed all seventy two cities of Rufeng Sect in blood.

Emperor of the Mortal Realm.

Who married the most beautiful woman in the world, who killed teacher and family alike, who tread on countless people to come out on top.

The person continued in an icy tone: "You are Mo Weiyu."

Mo Weiyu.

Evil beyond redemption, may he die ten thousand deaths and be denied reincarnation.

Mo Weiyu, deserving of naught but to be torn to pieces at Sisheng Peak, his heart and eyes dug out, he ought not get an intact corpse!

"WHO ARE YOU!!!!"

Mo Ran saw red. The youthful demeanor disappeared completely off his face to be replaced by a ruthless, fiendish snarl as he stood off against that person at

the end of the hallway, on the very verge of lunging at the other's throat and ripping it to pieces along with all of those names he never wanted to hear again!

The person lifted a hand wrapped in black silk, and the entire hallway was instantly covered in layers of ice, dividing the space between them.

"You can't call this blade anymore, can you." The person walked closer, slow and leisurely, stopping some ten paces away, "Emperor of the Mortal Realm.....or maybe it's better to call you Mo Ran now? How laughable, have you ever taken a good look at yourself, the way you are now?"

"A heart that is no longer cold and hard like steel; staying by Chu Wanning's side as you have, even actually developing some fondness for him."

"Rebirth, rebirth. I wonder where that person is, the one you swore to protect in the last lifetime?"

Mo Ran's expression changed instantly: "Shi Mei?! What did you do to Shi Mei?!"

The person did not answer, only sneering coldly: "Do you know why you can't call Bu'gui anymore?" He traced a fingertip slowly along the black body of the blade, "It's because your soul is about to change, your hatred about to dissipate.....your regret, as you lay dying, was that you couldn't protect your Mingjing-shixiong, and your wish was that, if there was a next lifetime.....that you definitely won't fail him again."

Those piercing eyes turned on him.

"Mo Ran, have you lived up to that?!"

"I——"

"The ghost realm barrier is soon to rupture, and what happened back then is sure to repeat. Do you intend to watch him die again? Do you plan to beg Chu Wanning for mercy again? ——All you're doing is letting your second chance go to waste, you don't deserve to touch Bu'gui ever again."

"I don't need you to tell me that!" Mo Ran roared, enraged, "What happens between me and Shi Mei is no one else's business! Since you already know I'm a reborn person, then who are you? The fake Gouchen? Or some dead ghost that's been reborn just like me!"

"Heh....." The person snickered lightly, "Some dead ghost that's been reborn..... yes, I suppose I am some dead ghost that's been reborn. Or did you really think, with the way the world is right now, that you were the only one who was graced by the heavens to be reborn?

Just who exactly is this!

Blurry faces flashed frantically through his mind, one after the other.

The ones who had died before him in the past life.

Xue Zhengyong, Madam Wang, Chu Wanning, Song Qiutong, Ye Wangxi.....

Or the ones who had charged Wushang Palace just in time to see him off. Xue Meng, Mei Hanxue, the executioners from the ten great sects.....

Who is it.....*who is it!!!!!!*

Just who found out his secret, seized his weakness! Of all his demons from a lifetime ago, just who climbed out from the underworld to chase him down and force him back on the road to ruin! Who is it!

But in the split second it had taken for him to think, there was a sudden flash before his eyes and the man had already moved to stand right in front of him with a flurry of robes. The sheer strength of this person, even after rebirth, rattled Mo Ran.

Bu'gui was already pressed against his chest; just a bit of pressure and it would pierce through his flesh and into his heart.

"Mo Weiyu, I thought you to be a devoted person in matters of affection, but perhaps your Mingjing-shixiong simply doesn't have the fortune of your favor. Even in your second life, you still care nothing for him."

Mo Ran gritted his teeth: "Bullshit."

"Is it though?" The person smirked darkly, one hand closing around Mo Ran's throat and then sliding slowly down to rest on his chest, "Does he truly have any place in your heart? Even the little bit of memory you used to cherish has long since worn away, is there even anything left anymore?"

Mo Ran growled: "As if you would know who's in my heart better than I do! You've blathered on long enough, why don't you just take off that veil and show me your face already!"

"Don't be in such a hurry." The person's voice was like smoke and his gaze like mist, both with a thread of contempt, "I'll show you when you're about to die in this life."

"You die first, you——"

He didn't even finish the sentence when he suddenly felt a bone-chilling cold underfoot. Mo Ran looked down to find that the person's icy thorns had already climbed up his body without him knowing.

Ice spells, ice thorns..... water elemental.....

Who is it, who from the past life used such spells.....

He had met with far too many adversaries, and his head was a complete mess as he scrambled to remember them all.

Xue Meng, fire.

Chu Wanning, metal and wood.

Ye Wangxi, earth.

Xue Zhengyong, earth.

Just who is it, why couldn't he think of someone who had such powerful control over ice.

"You're not wrong, I'll die too. But, Mo Weiyu, that won't be for a long, long time."

The ice spread quickly over his entire body.

This person's strength was truly terrifying; Mo Ran released some spiritual energy to fend off the ice, and was immediately felt a burst of immense and oppressive force bearing down on him.

This person before him might rival even Chu Wanning!!!!

Water elemental.

Who!!!!

For one fleeting instant, a blurry face seemed to flash through his mind, but that person's hand clamped down on his neck before he could focus on it.

Fingertips wrapped in black silk caressed his throat. There was no reflection in that person's dark eyes.

"Your Majesty needn't concern yourself with the length of my life." He spoke slowly, "More importantly, let me help you retrieve some basic human emotions

so that you don't screw up my plans doing everything but what you're supposed to."

"Nngh——!"

There was a wet sound of something being cut into.

Bu'gui cried out in sorrow as it pierced its former master's flesh.

"It's not deep. Just getting some of your blood to bind the seal."

True to his word, the person only took some blood from the wound to mark between his brows, then began chanting some kind of incantation.

A searing pain exploded in Mo Ran's head. He cursed loudly: "FUCK. YOUR. MOTHER! The fuck did I do to you last lifetime, did I chop you into mincemeat or kill all eighteen generations of your ancestors or some shit? Fucking hell, the fuck you doing!!"

"Shh, hold still. It's just a virtue spell."

"I don't fucking care if it's a virtue spell or a vice spell, can you stop grossing me out [8]? Fuck off!!!"

"Mo Ran ah." The person sighed softly while drawing a seal at his brow, "How could you bear to tell me to fuck off?" He paused, then resumed chanting, "Heart lesser than water, fervor unstoppable. Heart gate.....open."

Agony burst abruptly through his chest!
"You....."

The ice was dispelled all of a sudden. Mo Ran stumbled, legs giving out as he sunk slowly to his knees, face pale and colorless.

"You should thank me." Expression apathetic, the black-robed person looked down at him through lowered lashes for a while, then said evenly, "I've heightened the emotions in your heart, love and hate clearer still. Surely you should be able to figure your own feelings out now? If you still don't know to do all in your power, up to and including giving your life to protect Shi Mei, even after all this, then you.....are truly useless, nothing more than an unwanted child tossed aside!"

So this virtue spell makes love and hate more intense and clear-cut?
Why would this person go to such lengths to preserve Shi Mei's life.....
Water elemental.....

These were the last scattered thoughts in his head before his consciousness faded.

Mo Ran crumpled to the floor with a thud, thick curtains of lashes closing over his eyes. The black-robed person stared coldly at him for a while, then slowly crouched down to take his pulse, thinking for a short moment before lifting a hand to gather a brilliant blue light in his palm.

"Forget."

The black-robed person uttered in a low voice. The blue light glowed brighter still, and Mo Ran's tightly locked brows slowly relaxed.

When he wakes, all he will remember is going out and trying to summon the holy weapon to no avail. He will remember nothing else, nor will he know that there is another reborn person in this world.

And the virtue spell, though its effects last for only a few days, is excellent for showing the lost where their desire truly lies.

"With your emotions heightened, you just might wake up to find yourself even more in love with Shi Mingjing, so in love that you want nothing more than to dig out your own heart and give it to him." The black-robed person said in a cold voice.

"See you later, Emperor Taxian-Jun."

The storm blew over and the waves settled back down. Mo Ran opened his eyes the next morning to find himself lying on the floor next to Chu Wanning's bed. He turned his head to the side—the window seemed to have been blown open by the wind sometime during the night; it was half-closed, swinging gently in the morning breeze, creaking every time it contacts the wooden beam.

It was quiet inside the room. Mo Ran didn't have to check the bed to know that Chu Wanning was still asleep.

The sky outside the patterned window was a dull teal. The morning sky was often pale before the rising sun breaks through the clouds to dust a blush on her cheeks and bathe her in warmth; few people rose this early, so she didn't bother painting her wan, tired countenance.

The breeze from the outside carried the faint scent of fresh grass and morning dew.

Mo Ran lay there for a while, waiting for consciousness to come to him before sitting up, only to feel a stab of pain in his shoulder.

That's weird, why's there a rip in his clothes, and dried blood under it?

He stared at it blankly for a while.

Didn't he go out last night to test Bu'gui? He seemed to remember that it didn't respond at all, so it was probably a fake. And then.....

Tsk, can't remember.

Looking around, he found a thick nail sticking out from the dark brown floor. Must've gotten scratched by the nail then; was he so deeply asleep that he didn't even feel it?

He draped an outer robe over his shoulders and looked toward the bed.

Chu Wanning lay there, peacefully in repose. He had long since gotten used to him being all aloof and high-up, enjoying the best, while he himself had to settle for the leftovers, like making do with the floor at the foot of the bed. But he felt extra irritable today for some reason, glaring at that person's figure with an itch in his teeth.

"How come you always get the bed while I have to sleep on the floor? Sure the saying goes 'respect your teacher,' but doesn't it also say to 'love your young'?"

Mo Ran was irked.

And he only got more disgruntled when he remembered the nail sticking out from the floor that gave him a cut for no damn reason.

It was still early, and he didn't want to curl up pitifully on the floor anymore, so he climbed on the bed and closed his eyes to go back to sleep.

The bed was spacious enough that the two of them, one facing left and the other facing right, didn't have to touch.

They had once slept in each other's arms; now they slept with an invisible barrier in between.

In the last lifetime they had been skin to skin, limbs entangled, and, in the most frenzied days, he wouldn't even pull out after making love to him. These

two who had once been so intimate now lay on opposite ends of the bed to sleep.

Ch.89 This Venerable One's Past Affair With You

>> dub/noncon; reminder to close the tab and walk away if you don't wanna see it

When Mo Ran woke again, it was already bright outside and the sun was high in the sky.

Mo Ran rolled over and blinked—Chu Wanning was surprisingly still asleep.

Maybe it was the effect of the tapir fragrance dew, or maybe it was because of his poor health lately, coupled fitful sleep often troubled by dreams, but he was still deeply asleep even at this hour. His back was turned to him, long, inky hair spilling loosely across pillow and bed, the color of the night.

Mo Ran: “.....”

Since Shizun wasn't up yet, there was even less reason for the disciple to be any kind of industrious. The bed was too comfortable, might as well lie around some more.

But it was boring just lying around, so Mo Ran scooched closer and started playing with Chu Wanning's hair.

Shizun's hair always smelled faintly of flowers; soft as smoke, fine as mist, it was one of Mo Ran's favorite things to touch.

He brushed his fingers through those misty strands, the smooth, satiny feeling wrapping around his fingers and making him feel all tingly inside.

The patterned, dark-colored bed curtains drifted gently in the breeze that swept through the window.

He narrowed his eyes; certain parts of him were particularly energetic in the mornings, and with such a pleasant sensation at the tips of his fingers, one that was so familiar, so.....

He held a lock of Chu Wanning's hair to his nose and breathed in.

The long, soft strands called to mind things from the bygone past.

Ever since his rebirth, he had tried his best to not think too much about the more lustful segments of their wanton history together, but for some reason, he simply felt like indulging in some reminiscence this morning.

His throat felt a little dry.

He didn't want to touch his body anymore, but hair should be fine. Closing his eyes, he pressed his lips lightly against the inky darkness between his fingers.

This inky darkness.....

It was the same inky darkness back then, at Sisheng Peak's Wushan Palace, falling around Mo Ran like a curtain. He held that man's slender waist between his hands, the feeling of lean muscles beneath his fingertips completely different from the feel of a woman.

Chu Wanning worked himself up and down where he straddled Mo Ran's hips. It must have hurt, by the way his sharp brows were pulled so tightly together and specks of light glistened in those phoenix eyes, ferocity and despair tinged a vivid red. He was so resentful, so unresigned, yet so helplessly pitiful.

From his place as the victor, Mo Ran's voice was even and not without malice as he made demands of him.

“Faster.”

“.....”

"Are you tired already? Moving this slowly."

But even like this, Chu Wanning's ironclad will remained firm, refused to yield. He breathed out, hatred in his watery, red-tinged eyes, then he bit down on his lip and began to move, fast and rough, almost as if in self-punishment.

It was agony.

He did it again and again; even when his arched back began to shudder and cold sweat drenched his body, still he didn't beg, didn't even make a sound.

Through the long inky strands hanging before his eyes, Mo Ran's eyes were bright in the darkness of night, burning with animalistic desire, madness, ecstasy, gratification.

".....Ngh!"

A stifled groan—it seemed the man on top of him finally couldn't take the pain any longer. Mo Ran's eyes darkened as he sat up without warning and wrapped his arms around the sweat-soaked body that was trembling ever so slightly. He tried so hard to endure it, but still he trembled..... and the change in position only sheathed Mo Ran even deeper inside of him; he felt like his stomach might get pierced through.

That cruel, ruthless person caressed him, his touch tender yet venomous.

"Chu Wanning, did you ever think you'd end up like this one day, sitting in my lap, taking my cock?" He gripped him tightly in his arms, fucking slowly in and out, nuzzling intimately as a shiver ran through him.

"Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal..... heh, in the end, you still had to open your legs and ask me to fuck you."

Hands wandering along the other's waist, he thrust in deep, feeling Chu Wanning's tightness around himself. He was so intoxicated that there were practically fireworks going off in his chest, but he put on a front of calm indifference as he tormented and humiliated him.

"Didn't you say I was lowly, didn't you look down on me? But Chu Wanning, now it's you who seeks my favor." He sunk his teeth viciously into the other's jaw, "Look down, look at how you're sucking me in, hm? Between the two of us, just who's the lowly one here, my good Shizun?"

"....." Trembling, Chu Wanning closed his eyes. He didn't want to hear these dirty words.

It was..... his first time.....

With the person he had once liked, but it was torture worse than death.

"Open your eyes."

Came the callous order by his ear.

"I still have Xue Meng. You know what I'll do if you don't listen."

There was no choice; slowly, he opened his eyes, brimming with tears that he refused to let fall.

The hand on his jaw forced him to look down where he was taking his disciple's cock. The sound of flesh against flesh, the stickiness of blood mixed with thick fluids, all of it was unbearably wanton.

"Up a little."

There was no strength in his legs, but he didn't want Mo Ran's help, the last tattered piece of his dignity forcing his body up by strength of will alone. The hardness inside him slid out until only the engorged head was pressed into his entrance.

Mo Ran wrapped his hand around his length and thrust in shallowly a few times—not too deeply, just enough for Chu Wanning see himself get breached. Chu Wanning's lashes trembled the whole time, maybe from pain, or humiliation, or arousal.

"You are such a slut." Mo Ran said in a low voice, "If I'd known sooner, I would've fucked you back when I was your disciple."

He was an uncultured scoundrel after all, no manners or elegance to speak of.

The vulgar words cut into Chu Wanning's heart like a blade.

He lifted his head, closed his eyes, and spoke for the first time that night in a voice that was raw and raspy.

He said:

"Mo Ran, just kill me."

The hand on his waist twitched imperceptibly.

Then Mo Ran smiled, sweet as ever, framed by a pair of charming dimples.

"Okay."

Chu Wanning's eyes flew open.

In those watery eyes that made his blood boil with arousal, Mo Ran saw the reflection of his own twisted smile.

"I won't stop you if you want to die. But you don't get to choose how. I'll have you get fucked by a thousand people while Xue Meng watches. Actually, Xue Meng should join in too. How about it?"

"You——!"

The cruel words stung him like poison, and, like a venomous scorpion, Mo Ran watched his work with glee, watched the blood drain from Chu Wanning's face and the way those slightly parted lips trembled faintly despite his restraint. Mo Ran suddenly felt a deep sense of satisfaction, tinged with pity, but also delight and arousal. He pulled Chu Wanning back into his arms and buried himself deep inside of him, fucking relentlessly into him at an unforgiving pace, almost frenzied: "Hah, just how gullible are you, to actually believe that?" He let out a deep laugh before kissing him ravenously, his hands rubbing and stroking him as he said between heavy breaths, "Don't think too much, I was just messing with you."

Chu Wanning seemed like he was about to fall apart with every thrust, but more than that, it was almost as if his soul had already shattered.

"Just messing with you." Mo Ran's breaths came out in harsh pants; it wasn't enough, so he pushed him down to the ground and leaned over him, bearing down with his weight and lifting his leg to fuck into him deeper, snapping his hips with abandon.

"How could I bear to let anyone else touch you like that..... you're mine..... mine alone....."

Pale, slender fingers scrabbled against the floor, but there was nothing to hold onto.

Chu Wanning was helpless in the end; he could only let him do as he pleased, until his consciousness began to fade and the light in his eyes grew dim.

Suddenly lifting his hand, he covered his eyes.

Softly, he said: "Mo Ran....."

"Mo Ran, if you still have any compassion in you..... any conscience....."
His eyelashes trembled against the back of his hand.

"Then please..... don't do this anymore....."

"Mo Ran....."

His voice broke on a sob.

It was the first time Mo Ran had ever seen him cry in the past life.

"Mo Ran, I can't take it anymore....."

"It hurts....."

Chu Wanning rolled over suddenly, jolting Mo Ran out of his debauched reminiscing. The past dissipated like a scattering of birds, leaving only his heart thumping against his ribcage.

The long strands between his fingers slipped away, but that person turned toward him, his face so close now that he could see his individual eyelashes.

How beautiful, he thought.

In all fairness, Chu Wanning's looks weren't gentle or soft by any means. His features were handsome, sharp and intense as if cut by blades, and actually more masculine than average.

But that only made it all the more enticing.

Mo Ran wanted to see this proud, unbending man come undone beneath himself.

His heart beat faster and faster.

He stared at Chu Wanning's face, gaze drifting inch by inch until it landed on those lightly colored lips that were slightly parted in sleep.

He leaned in subconsciously.

Just a little closer and their lips would meet.

The sweet taste of dew.

Mo Ran's throat worked in a swallow; his mouth felt dry. A little closer, just a little more.....almost.

Suddenly, a flash of clarity shot through his arousal-addled mind and he froze, face deathly pale.

What was he doing!!!!

Quickly sitting up, Mo Ran stared at the man in the bed——Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning, no matter how much he'd bedded him before, that was all in the past already! The fuck was he doing, had he lost his mind??

Was it possible that he really did like him?

Mo Ran paled at the thought, so unsettled that he couldn't think straight.

He drew in a deep breath and buried his face in his hands, scrubbing forcefully, and then, cursing under his breath, he pulled on an outer robe and left in a hurry, as if running away.

Author's Notes:

boss: I spent so much fucking effort to grant you a peek into your heart, but not only did you not think of Shi Mei at all, your head is filled with the little act by you and your shizun? Looks like I'm Santa Claus, coming here just to deliver your car keys to you, idiot! My rage is endless!

The previous life has smut, and is naturally accompanied by glass shards, I won't warn for knives in the previous life, I've already said it's all car knife car knife knife car knife car, haha, besides, are you scared when you see the word count

Actually it's because important content was deleted~

Take this small car for now, after all this is a flashback, we'll start the bigger car in this lifetime~

[1] 寒 Han-cold 鱗 Lin-scales

[2] 乾坤囊 pouch of heaven and earth/yin and yang/the universe; basically the xianxia bag of holding

[3] A soup dish with thinly sliced tofu threads that melt in your mouth

[4] I angrily made a collage of their meal. Here, be hungry with me

[5] Elite guards responsible for guarding their master's safety and things like assassination and spying

[6] A class of anti-inflammatory pain killer that also stops bleeding

[7] After a tale of how King Qixuan runs to the ugly but capable concubine Zhong Wu Yan when there are problems to be solved, and immediately flocks to beautiful but useless Xia Ying Chun to party when there are no troubles.

[8] 恶心 vice/evil heart (as opposed to virtue/kind heart); this word as a whole can also be read as "disgusting"

二哈和他的白猫师尊 Dumb Husky and His White Cat

Shizun (2Ha/Erha for short) By 肉包不吃肉 Meatbun

Doesn't Eat Meat

THIS WORK IS R18 AT THE VERY MINIMUM.

Non-exhaustive warning list: rape, underage sex, explicit narration of sex, gore, cannibalism, suicide, genocide, corporal punishment (master punishing disciple), slavery, violence murder and all that, an adult having feelings for a minor, moral grey zones, tons of other “immoral” things.

Please, please please do not read this if any of that will upset you. Love yourself and close out of this tab, thanks.

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Ch.90 This Venerable One's Idiom Explanation is Just Fine

It was already noon by the time Chu Wanning finally woke up.

The tapir fragrance dew was certainly very effective, and he managed to get a full night's rest, undisturbed by dreams. Yawning, he sat up slowly.

"Mo Ran?"

That disciple of his loved to sleep in far more than he did, so it was a surprise when he couldn't find him still on his floor bed. Chu Wanning blinked, then tried calling for him again.

No reply.

He stood and smoothed down his robes, putting up the wispy strands of his long hair while walking over to the sectioned-off front room. Steam rose from behind the screen divider that was elegantly painted with the image of wild birds soaring through clouds woven between mountain peaks, as if there was someone bathing behind it.

"...Mo Ran."

Standing on this side of the divider, Chu Wanning tried again.

Still no reply.

Growing suspicious, Chu Wanning knocked on the wooden frame of the divider. After several attempts with no response still, he finally walked around to the other side of the divider with furrowed brows.

This part of the room was specifically for washing and bathing, and there was a large bath barrel made of camphor wood right in the middle. Chu Wanning glanced hastily over it—it was filled with hot, steamy water and floating with bathing herbs set out by the inn earlier, but there was no one to be seen.

But, looking around again, Mo Ran's clothes were folded neatly over the wooden frame.

He couldn't possibly have bathed and then ran out naked right?

Chu Wanning's temples throbbed as he shoved the terrifying thought aside, lips pressed tightly together and face slightly ashen.

He turned and was just about to leave when a '*glug glug*' sound came from behind him.

Chu Wanning looked back to see bubbles rising to the water surface from under all the herbs and petals floating in the barrel.

—There's someone inside?

No sooner had the thought crossed his mind than a naked young man sprung up from the barrel with a splash like a dragon soaring out from the water. Chu Wanning was so startled that he subconsciously backed up two steps.

It seemed he was holding his breath underwater earlier and so didn't hear Chu Wanning calling for him from the outside. Standing up from the water when he couldn't hold it any longer, the upper half of his body was fully exposed while he shook the water from his hair like a dog drying itself. All of it splashed right on Chu Wanning's robes.

"Mo Ran!"

"Ah!" He froze in the middle of shaking his head, eyes opening wide and round, clearly not having expected him to be there when he came out of the water. He gasped, "Shizun!"

"You..."

His eyes swept across the young man's well-proportioned figure, with shoulders that have already become quite broad, the lines of his body firm and defined, supple and youthfully taut. Droplets of water followed the contours of his toned chest, gathering into little rivulets that trickled slowly down, sparkling and dazzling under the sunlight.

He looked just like a beautiful merman, half out of the water, eyes watery and glistening, a couple of petals in his wet hair that clung to his body.

Mo Ran wiped the water off his face and moved toward Chu Wanning's direction with a grin, shoulder blades flexing like a leopard as he folded his arms over the edge of the bath barrel and tilted his head up to beam brightly at him.

Chu Wanning found himself a little dizzy and his face a little warm, asking on instinct: "What are you doing?"

"Taking a bath."

"In the morning?"

"Hehe." His conscience was a bit guilty—he was actually rinsing off with cold water trying to put out the fire in his loins; it worked well enough, but then, since he had already stripped anyway, he felt like he might as well take a bath too. The soak put him in a good mood, so he dived down to practice holding his breath. He certainly hadn't expected Chu Wanning to wander in like this.

"What's that goofy smile for?" Chu Wanning knit his brows, trying to cover up the heat steaming his brains with the cool tone of his voice, "Why didn't you wake me up if you were up early? Messing around over here by yourself like this, throwing your clothes all over the place, where are your man—"

"Shizun. You...got some water here."

There was a splash as he lifted his hand to wipe Chu Wanning's cheek.

"—ners."

Mo Ran laughed; he forgot that his hand was wet too and would only get even more water on Chu Wanning's cheek.

Chu Wanning stood frozen in place, the air around him going down several degrees in temperature. His face was strained and his lips were pressed together, only his eyelashes quivering occasionally.

It was like he was trying to train a hunting dog only to get nuzzled by the crafty pup instead.

"...Get out and get dressed. We have to head back to the sect."

In the end, Chu Wanning threw these words out with a cold expression and left with a swoosh of his sleeves.

But, where Mo Ran couldn't see, the tips of his ears were red.

Just like how, where he couldn't see, a pair of dewy, complicated eyes, still tinged with yearning, stared helplessly after him as he left, all the way until he disappeared behind a corner.

The cute smile vanished off Mo Ran's face to be replaced by frustration.

He smacked the water in annoyance, then scooped some up to scrub forcefully at his face.

What the actual hell.

What was *wrong* with him today?

All he did was look at him a little while bathing, touched his face briefly.

He had only just managed to suppress his arousal, and now he's hard again...

"Why did it take you so long just to get dressed?"

Chu Wanning turned toward him from where he stood by the window, his robes drifting gently in the breeze and fine strands of hair softly caressing his jade-like cheeks as he chided with exasperation in his voice.

Mo Ran coughed and mumbled vaguely: "I was drying my hair with a spell but I'm not very good at it, so it took a while. Sorry to keep Shizun waiting."

A bit surprised by the uncharacteristic propriety of his words, Chu Wanning shot him another glance before saying: "Go get packed since you're done washing, then we can go rent a boat. I don't feel like riding swords, and I'm tired of horses too, so let's go by water, enjoy some sights on the way."

"Okay, sounds good." Mo Ran didn't even dare look at him for too long, coughing a couple more times as cover.

Chu Wanning frowned: "What's wrong with your throat?"

“...Nothing.”

He turned hastily to go pack. Then they stopped at a store to pick up some snacks and dry foods for the trip before heading to the docks to rent a vessel.

They went down the Yangtze River, and whenever they came across impassable areas, they would expand the wooden wings of the boat and soar through the sky on a magical draft instead. The travel wasn't fast, but it was peaceful and relaxing.

Eight days later, they arrived at Sisheng Peak, the wooden boat coming down to dock by the mountain gate.

Mo Ran lifted the bamboo curtain for Chu Wanning to step out from the cabin first before following after. It was late at night, and the moon hung bright overhead. Yuheng Elder had already written to Xue Zhengyong before with explicit instructions to not send a reception, so they didn't meet with anyone until they'd already climbed up the stairs to the main gate, where there were four disciples guarding the entrance.

“Yuheng Elder!”

“Mo-gongzi!”

For some reason, panic flashed across the faces of the disciples at the sight of them. Before they could react, the four of them dropped to their knees on the ground, looking up as they entreated urgently: “Elder, Gongzi, there are people inside right now seeking retribution against you! The Sect Leader sent a messenger bird to tell you two to keep away for now, but looks like that fat bird wasn't fast enough! Please go hide out at Wuchang Town for a bit, definitely don't go inside right now!”

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes: “What exactly is the matter, to have you all this panicked?”

“It's people from the upper cultivation realm, they're accusing Elder of demonic cultivation, and want to take you to Tianyin Pavilion^[1] for an inquiry!”

“Tianyin Pavilion?” Mo Ran repeated, alarmed, “Isn't that the prison collectively set up by the ten great sects, especially reserved for only the most heinous of criminals?”

“That's the one! Th-they're here about that incident at Butterfly Town!” A female disciple among the four said anxiously, “Does the Elder still remember? That time when you were caned as punishment!”

“That can't have been anything more than misuse of cultivation techniques or embroiling ordinary people, at *most*. Besides, Shizun has already accepted punishment for it. Why did they suddenly bring up that old affair again, and even going so far as to involve Tianyin Pavilion.” Mo Ran frowned, “And what's this about demonic cultivation?”

“We don't know the details either, but we heard that every single person at Butterfly Town died overnight, killed by some half-ghost half-deity thing that seemed to be doing someone's bidding. The ghost-deity is exceedingly powerful, and the average wandering cultivator definitely wouldn't be able to order her about, so those people from the upper cultivation realm are sus...suspecting Yuheng Elder of having done it!”

Chu Wanning: “.....”

“Pfft.” Mo Ran laughed, “And there I was getting worried. That's just a simple misunderstanding, easy enough to explain away, there's no need to hide.” He

turned to grin at Chu Wanning, “Shizun, can you believe these people? If you expel some small fiend, they’ll say you’re taking opportunities from the younger ones, and if you purge a major demon, they’ll accuse you of practicing demonic cultivation and keeping some ghost-deity to do your bidding. At this rate, we’d best stop doing anything at all, just sit home meditating all day like they do.”

But Chu Wanning wasn’t laughing. His expression looked terrible, and he was silent for a while before asking: “Every single person at Butterfly Town is dead?”

“That’s what I heard. Not a single survivor.”

“.....”

Chu Wanning closed his eyes.

Seeing his strange expression, the female disciple asked uneasily: “Elder?”

“The incident was not my doing, but it may have occurred because I was not sufficiently thorough in the exorcism. If I am indeed to blame, then I would not shirk my responsibility.” Chu Wanning opened his eyes slowly, “Mo Ran, let’s go in.”

Inside Loyalty Hall, twelve lamps of coiling bronze lined the sides, each ten feet in height with nine layers of branches extending from the central stand, shorter toward the top and longer toward the bottom, for a total of three hundred and fifty six candle lanterns that lit up the main hall of Sisheng Peak so brightly that it practically looked like daytime.

Xue Zhengyong, dressed in full martial attire, stood tall on the high platform of the hall, looking like an iron-cast statue as he stared down the people below with predator-like eyes.

“Li-zhuangzhu, I’ll say it one last time. Yuheng Elder is not at the sect right now, and moreover, I can guarantee with my very life that what happened at Butterfly Town was not his doing. So quit throwing around all these baseless... whatchamacallit...”

Next to him, Madam Wang whispered discreetly from behind the cover of her sleeve: “Allegations.”

“Ahem, quit throwing around all these baseless whatchamacallit allegations!” Xue Zhengyong declared with a grandly imposing sweep of his hand.

Madam Wang: “.....”

Not counting the guard disciples of Sisheng Peak, there were some thirty-odd people standing in the hall, dressed in bluish-green robes, carrying horsetail whiskers in their arms, and wearing jinxian-style^[2] hats on their heads—disciples from the recently established, up-and-coming Bitan Sect of the upper cultivation realm. The man at their head was about fifty-some years old, with a pair of long whiskers that stuck out to the sides and drifted in the airflow like those of a catfish—it was none other than the leader of Bitan Sect himself, Li Wuxin^[3].

Li Wuxin twirled his whisker as he sneered: “Xue-zhangmen, I’m only here to reason with you because your sect is yet considered a righteous one. The tragedy at Butterfly Town happened only after your Yuheng Elder and his disciples went to perform exorcism. Other than the three of them, the Chen household had no contact whatsoever with any other cultivators. There is evidence and witness both, you have no choice but to admit fault in this matter.”

Xue Meng, standing next to his father, couldn't take it anymore and rebuked: "And what fucking right do you lot even have to speak? When have you ever taken it upon yourselves to deal with any of the lower cultivation realm's problems? All you ever do is sit on your hands trying to cultivate yourselves to immortality, but as soon as something happens you immediately try to lay the blame on my Shizun, how is that fair!"

"Xue-gongzi." Instead of getting mad, Li Wuxin directed a meaningful gaze at him and smiled, "I've heard of you before, that people call you son of the phoenix. But meeting you in person today and witnessing your, heh, poise and composure, has certainly been a, shall we say, eye-opening experience."

"You——!"

Li Wuxin rolled his eyes and turned back to Xue Zhengyong: "Xue-zhangmen, we of the upper cultivation realm adhere strictly to the laws, and we intend to get to the bottom of this. If you really will not cooperate and hand over Yuheng, Mo Ran, and company, then I will have no choice but to go entreat the foremost sect in the cultivation world, Rufeng Sect, to come take charge of the investigation!"

Xue Zhengyong's always had a fierce temper. He scoffed at the threat: "Hoh. I'm well aware that your Bitan Sect is chummy with Rufeng Sect, but even if it was Nangong Liu himself standing before me today, I'd still tell him the same thing—I will not hand them over, this has nothing to do with Yuheng."

Xue Meng followed up: "Well then, Li-zhuangzhu, kindly see yourselves out."

"See that? Did everyone see that! See how difficult and unreasonable they are, aiding and abetting!" A man's shaky voice suddenly burst forth from the crowd, "The same thing happened back then, when that Mo guy stole my friend's things, and we came here courteously trying to seek justice, they just brushed us off and kicked us out just like this! Li-zhuangzhu, you saw it right? If Sisheng Peak is allowed to continue acting so outrageously above the law, the lower cultivation realm will be done for!"

He had barely finished talking when a quiet chuckle came from the entrance.

Everyone turned collectively toward the gate—there, in a shadowed area not reached by the light stood a blue-robed young man in light armor, leaning casually against the intricate carvings of the vermilion doorframe as he watched the scene within the hall with a languid expression.

He was extremely handsome, skin supple and firm under the candle light, practically glowing.

"I say, Chang-gongzi, when exactly have I ever stolen anything from your friend?" His smile was soft and charming, "Pray tell, that Rong San...or was it Rong Jiu? I can't remember. Anyway, that pretty boy, is he your friend, or is he your paramour? Rather deceptive of you, hm? What if you hurt his feelings?"

The one with the woeful complaints was none other than that merchant Chang from Yizhou, the very same one who had declared that he wasn't done with Sisheng Peak before.

Chang-gongzi whipped his head around, startled to see Mo Ran at first, but then something flickered in his eyes and he started howling in misery:

"Mo Weiyu, you bastard, Jiu-er and my friendship is of mortar and pestle^[4], perfectly innocent. He's already met with such a tragic death at the hands of your fiendish ilk, yet you—you still dare slander his name!"

"What?" Mo Ran's heart dropped, his eyes widening slightly, "Rong Jiu is dead?"

Chang-gongzi said, angrily and tearfully: "His parents are from Butterfly Town, and he met with misfortune while visiting home some days ago. That was how I found out about you and your Shizun's evil deeds! And why I went to Li-zhuangzhu for justice!"

But Mo Ran's opinion of Rong Jiu was the opposite of positive, so he only gave a curt wave of the hand after the initial shock had passed: "Friendship of mortar and pestle? So, like, you're the pestle and he's the mortar, pound pound pound? Not sure how that's innocent but okay."

"M-Mo Ran!" Chang-gongzi hadn't expected any of that and was quite affronted: "Y-you illiterate reprobate! You, you——"

"Cough..." It was a bit much for Madam Wang too.

Only Xue Zhengyong blinked and said nothing. What mortar and pestle, can't be anything good; he felt like his nephew's words made quite a lot of sense actually, nothing wrong with 'em.

From the darkness of night came a sigh like the depths of mountains and the shattering of jade, like the melting of an icy lake, deep and indescribably lovely, and then a slender, well-proportioned hand...

Delivered an unceremonious slap right to Mo Ran's face.

"Such obscenity. Friendship of mortar and pestle means a friendship that disregards status and means, like that between Gong Shamu and Wu You." Chu Wanning appeared at the door with a dark expression and a cross tone, "What are you doing hanging around the door being an embarrassment, get the hell inside!"

"Shizun!"

"Shizun!"

Surprised and overjoyed to see him, Xue Meng and Shi Mei came forward to greet him.

But Xue Zhengyong's eyes widened in irritation and exasperation both: "Yuheng, what are you doing back here all of a sudden?"

"How long were you planning to hold out by yourself if I didn't come back?" Chu Wanning strode calmly into Loyalty Hall, his handsome face appearing almost immortal-like in grace and elegance under the candle light. He came to a stop before the golden seat inside the hall and exchanged a nod with Xue Zhengyong before turning with a flourish of his wide sleeves.

"Chu Wanning of Sisheng Peak, humble bearer of the title of Yuheng Elder. It seems you have questions for me; I would not refuse you answers." Li Wuxin was staring in shock, but Chu Wanning, phoenix eyes like smoke, spared him only a glance before continuing in an even tone.

"Kindly do enlighten me."

Author's Notes:

Mini-theatre [Each character asks to be enlightened]

Chu Wanning: Heard that everyone thinks that I don't have enough top energy, heh, please enlighten me.

Weiyu 魏玉: Heard that everyone thinks that my bedroom skills aren't good, heh, please enlighten me.

Xue Meng: Heard that everyone thinks that I'm not straight enough, heh, please enlighten me.

Shi Mei: Heard that everyone thinks that I'm a black-hearted lotus, heh, please enlighten me.

Ye Wangxi: Heard that everyone thinks that I'm a girl, heh, please enlighten me.

Mei Hanxue: Heard that everyone thinks that I've already made an appearance in the novel, heh, please enlighten me.

Meatbun: That bro surnamed Mei at the end, no one thinks that you've already appeared, heh, if you're not happy with that, come hit me.

Ch.91 This Venerable One's Shizun is a Pro

Upon the great hall, this man's glamourous robe was white as snow; he stood with his hands folded behind him, the silk of his robes soft and light like clouds, expansive sleeves reaching the ground. While his expression appeared solemn and dignified, his eyes were slightly lifted, the lashes draping down; amidst the politeness there were three parts scorn, and three parts arrogance.

Li Wuxin had never imagined that *he* was the Yuheng Elder, and instantly his face dropped, "Chu, Chu..."

Chu Wanning spoke calmly, "Li-zhuangzhu, it's been a while."

"Why is it you!" Li Wuxin who was only just clever-tongued now couldn't utter a single word, his face paling like dry wax, "We lost all communication with you after you left Rufeng Sect, and here we thought you went to wander the world, yet who knew, you, you were actually casting pearls before swines!!"

Chu Wanning snorted, his eyes rather cool, "Thank you for thinking I am a pearl."

"....."

"Alright, enough small talk, let's discuss serious matters. There's been word that you think I've murdered the five hundred civilians of Butterfly Town to practice evil spells. This incident was not done by me, but since Li-zhuangzhu has come all this way, I'm sure some things have already been misunderstood. I have more important things to attend to, so I won't accompany Zhuangzhu to the Tianyin Pavilion. If Zhuangzhu has any questions he wants to ask, please ask them here now."

Then, like he was too lazy to even stand, Chu Wanning sat down in his seat. There's a designated seat for every elder within the Loyalty Hall; Chu Wanning's seat was situated on Xue Zhengyong's left, lined with fine bamboo mat and draping with half a roll of bamboo screen. Compared to Lucun Elder's flowery seat beside his, filled wholly with fresh blossoms, it truly appeared much too meagre and simple.

In these past years, Chu Wanning had never tried to purposely conceal his name, but to say he kept a low profile wasn't wrong either, so while the younger generation of Bitan Sect had heard of his name, they didn't know just how

powerful he was. But Li Wuxin wasn't like them. He'd been around the block for years, so how could he not know about the infamous Yuheng Elder?

His fists clenched tightly in his sleeves, and he kept stealing glimpses at Chang-gongzzi.

If it wasn't that he had already accepted a lavish payment from the Chang family, how would he have gotten landed with this messy deal. At first he thought the Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak was but some famous cultivator, yet who knew it turned out to be Chu Wanning who hadn't shown his face!

Had he known it was him, he would never have gotten himself roped into this mess no matter how much they paid him. Now he could neither proceed nor withdraw, what should he do...

While Li Wuxin kept his expression schooled, he was miserable inside.

Yet one of his direct disciples just had to be ignorant, thinking that it was this Yuheng Elder who was being unreasonable and his master didn't know how to handle him, so he spoke up thinking he was being clever, "Elder Chu, you recently went to Butterfly Town to exorcise evil, correct?"

Chu Wanning raised his lashes and gave him a look, "That's correct."

"Then, were you the one who sealed that ghost bride too?"

"Are you speaking of Luo Xianxian?"

"I..." Words died in that young man's throat. He had only known that the evil that went berserk in Butterfly Town was a ghost bride, but he didn't actually know more than that, so when Chu Wanning returned the questions, he didn't have any responses. He turned red, "In any case it's that ghost girl! Why do you have that many questions? She's young, about fifteen-sixteen, how many newly wed who died wrongly can there be in a small town?"

The corner of Chu Wanning's lip curled coldly, "Butterfly Town has the custom of marrying the dead, there's at least fifty if not a hundred ghost brides, so I really don't know which one you're speaking of.

"You——"

"Cease that familiar address, how improper. Stand down now, you boorish disciple!"

After having scolded that disciple who wanted to stand out, Li Wuxin changed face completely to one that was pleasant and agreeable, and he turned to Chu Wanning, "Chu-zongshi, it's the first time this disciple of mine has left the mountain, he doesn't know the rules so please don't be hard on him. The ghost bride he spoke of is indeed that Luo Xianxian."

Chu Wanning furrowed his brows slightly, "Luo Xianxian's resentful spirit went berserk?"

"Indeed." Li Wuxin sighed, "That ghost girl lost her mind. Never mind killing everyone in the Chen family, she went and slaughtered the entire town. By the time I led my disciples to go seal her, there was practically no one left in Butterfly Town still alive."

"How can that be..." Chu Wanning muttered.

"I had heard that the one who involved in this affair was Yuheng Elder of Sisheng Peak. There's something questionable about this whole business, which was why we've come knocking. Besides, I've obtained two things while at Butterfly Town. Chu-zongshi, please come examine them closer and see if they've aught to do with you."

He retrieved a bloodied yellow silk cloth from his sleeve as he spoke, intending to hand it to Chu Wanning.

But unexpectedly, Xue Meng stepped forward and blocked him with an irritated hmph, "I'll take it!"

"Um..."

"My Shizun likes to keep clean, he won't touch anything touched by outsiders!"

It was a bit of an exaggeration—Chu Wanning wasn't actually germaphobic, he just didn't like touching things stained by those he didn't like. Nonetheless, Chu Wanning couldn't stand Li Wuxin in the first place, so he allowed Xue Meng to mess around without saying a word, and only lowered his lashes as he sipped the hot tea Shi Mei served.

Li Wuxin swallowed his indignant anger since he couldn't do anything, and could only sneer as he passed the yellow silk to Xue Meng.

Under the candlelight, all eyes were focused.

Chu Wanning shook open that silk cloth. He only took a glance and his face dropped.

"The Passings Service Spell..."

"That's right. Chu-zongshi, based on my investigations, you were the one who temporarily sealed this resentful spirit Luo Xianxian, and before you left, you gave a copy of this Passings Service Spell to the only daughter of the Chen family, and told them to copy and recite it once a day for ten years, is that correct?"

"That's correct."

"That Passings Service Spell is in Chu-zongshi's handwriting, is that correct?"

"...That is indeed the case."

"But Chu-zongshi, at the end of every passage of this Passings Service Spell you've given, there are extra characters for a different spell. I trust you know what it is!?" Li Wuxin's voice was suddenly raised.

"Mark of the Returning Billows, a reversal spell!—Every time people in the Chen family completed a copy of the Passings Service Spell, they would then draw this reversal spell symbol, forcibly turning this spell that was meant to send off the dead into a spell that causes harm, encouraging the destruction of the seal until Luo Xianxian turned into a savage ghost and went berserk! Not a soul in the Chen family knew the ways of cultivation, so besides Yuheng Elder who personally gave them this silk cloth, I really can't think of a second person who could have taught them how to draw a spell this powerful!"

"Watch your words, old man!" Xue Meng was outraged, "If my Shizun wanted to kill them, why would he need to take such a huge detour?! What spell, reversal spell, can't writings be forged? You think it's my Shizun who drew it? Well maybe I'm suspicious it's you son of a bastard who copied it in secret so you can frame people!"

Li Wuxin smiled without mirth, "Xue Meng-gongzi, what's a young'un like you doing interrupting when the elders are speaking?"

Xue Zhengyong spoke up, "Li-zhuangzhu, isn't it a little farfetched to say Yuheng did this based on a silk cloth? My son is right, handwriting can be imitated. If someone wanted to frame Yuheng, they could simply copy his spell a few times and have it look similar."

"Then this begs the question of who Chu-zongshi's arch-nemesis is who'd go through all this just to harm him."

Mo Ran who had been quiet on the side all this time suddenly chuckled drily.

Li Wuxin looked to him, then recalled that whole vulgar talk of mortar and pestle and couldn't help but frown, "What are you laughing about now?"

"I'm laughing at how you're all so busy making speculations but totally forgot about one thing."

Xue Zhengyong, curiously, "What thing? Ran-er, what're you thinking?"

"I'm not that well-read, but it just so happens I know a bit about this Mark of the Returning Billows, and I just so happen to know how to draw it." Mo Ran laughed, "Here, look, isn't this it?"

As he spoke, the tip of his finger gathered a smudge of red spiritual power, and while he leaned lazily against the pillar, the spiritual power spread intricately in midair, and soon, a sophisticated and exquisite Mark of the Returning Billows was reflected in the air, as pretty as fireworks.

Xue Meng was shocked, "You mutt, that's amazing, when did you learn this?"

Mo Ran laughed, "It's there in Shizun's books. I thought it was interesting so I memorized it."

Then he casually pointed at that bright red spell, making it rise gradually into the sky, riding over the heads of all present. That red reversal mark glowed brilliantly, streaming bits of broken sparks.

"How's that. Why don't you all go ahead and compare this spell I drew with the one on that cloth, see if they don't look exactly the same?"

The disciples of Sisheng Peak all love a good spectacle, and when they saw Chu Wanning stoically tossing that silk cloth onto the table, looking like he silently consented to Mo Ran's method, they all immediately clamoured over, crowding into a circle to compare the two in detail.

Those from Bitan sect were all standing stiff at first, but afterwards they couldn't help but be curious themselves, some even hoping to pick faults, so they all gathered around too.

All those people looked it over for a good while, and in the end came to one conclusion.

What Mo Ran drew was exactly the same as the spell on the silk cloth, almost as if they were done by the same person.

Li Wuxin's idiot disciple from earlier spoke up again, completely shaken as he pointed at Mo Ran, "Good going! So you confess! You're the one who committed the murders, right!"

Mo Ran: "....."

Chu Wanning spoke evenly, "What's your name?"

"Hm? You're asking me?" That idiot disciple was taken aback, then he stood tall, holding his head high and puffing his chest out, and proclaimed proudly, "The thirteenth direct disciple of Wuxin, Zhen Congming^[5]."

"Pfft." Mo Ran snorted.

Chu Wanning, on the other hand, barely even reacted to "Very Smart"—after all, he himself had a name like "Scare you to death^[6]." He only said coolly,

"Young ones should learn to keep their mouths shut when the elders are speaking."

These words were obviously mocking Li Wuxin's comment on Mo Ran earlier, and when Li Wuxin heard, his face flushed the colour of pig's liver; while he was extremely frustrated, there was nothing he could do, so he could only beat around the bush with a hmpf, "Chu-zongshi's disciples are certainly outstanding young men, what skill, to be able to draw this spell exactly the same as a zongshi does."

"Li-zhuangzhu, it's not just me. If you knew how to draw this spell, it'd look exactly the same as mine and Shizun's too."

"What are you trying to say?!" Li Wuxin glared at Mo Ran.

Mo Ran laughed, "The strokes to the Mark of the Returning Billows are complicated; the level of skill, the heaviness of the ink, no element can be amiss. Which is why it doesn't matter who drew it, it'll all come out the same. This has absolutely nothing to do with writing style. If a drawing is even slightly off, the spell won't work."

"Complete nonsense!" To be corrected by a junior before a crowd, Li Wuxin couldn't help but become outraged from embarrassment, all the hairs of his beard standing on end, "What spell in this world would require such trickiness! I may not have ever practiced this spell, but I know that's all complete nonsense. Don't you go making things up, you little bastard!"

"He's not making up anything."

Li Wuxin was already at the end of his patience now, and he exclaimed in anger, "Chu Wanning, you're speaking without proof! How would you know! How can you know?! The flaws and weaknesses of a spell are usually known only to its creator. Do you dare proclaim yourself the creator of the Mark of the Returning Billows?!"

Chu Wanning lifted his eyes and gazed towards him stoically, then took another sip of tea before replying leisurely, "Daren't I? Then I'll tell it to you now."

Li Wuxin: "???"

"I created the Mark of the Returning Billows."

Li Wuxin: "....."

Author's Notes:

[The crazy nicknames of various characters]

Chu Wanning: Xia Sini (*Homophone for "scare you to death"*)

Mo Ran: Zhong Quangong (*Homophone for "loyal dog tops"*)

Xue Meng: Bu Zilian (*Homophone for "not self-obsessed"*)

Shi Mei: Zhen Bailian (*Homophone for "real white-lotus"*)

Ye Wangxi: Nan Haizi (*Homophone for "boy"*)

Mei Hanxue: Bu Haose (*Homophone for "not lecherous"*)

Ch.92 This Venerable One Revisits Butterfly Town

Everyone present was shocked by his words.

Especially the Bitan Sect disciples, their expressions flipping as if struck by lightning!

In the cultivation world, the average cultivators memorize spells, the better cultivators understand spells, and the top-notch cultivators adapt spells.

But far above and beyond the average, the better, and the top-notch stands still another tier of cultivators—those who have no need for memorization, have long since understood, and are unsatisfied with adaptation, those who have grasped the final step:

Creation.

These are the masters who refine unique pills and elixirs, the experts who craft unparalleled arms and armor, the geniuses who draft unprecedented spells and talismans, people whose skill commands the title of “Zongshi.”

To the common cultivators, these zongshi were only a name in a scroll, or else a seal on a magical treasure. Those young disciples from Bitan Sect never could have even imagined that the individual they dared try to arrest and bring to Tianyin Pavilion for interrogation was one such god-like person.

Li Wuxin's forehead was already covered in a sheen cold sweat, but as the leader of the sect, he had no choice but to put up a front and keep at it. He forcibly squeezed out a smile, his waxy yellow face the color of rice shells gleaming with a layer of grease.

“What a coincidence that this Mark of the Returning Billows was created by Chu-zongshi himself, this one has truly... ahaha, truly misunderstood Chu-zongshi. However, while fighting with the vengeful ghost of Luo Xianxian at Butterfly Town, this one also obtained another item. I wonder if this item might have something to do with Chu-zongshi.”

Chu Wanning furrowed his brows: “What item?”

Li Wuxin waved his hand, and “Very Smart” quickly brought over a brocade box.

“A weapon.”

Chu Wanning gazed silently at the box for a while before suddenly speaking: “Is it a willow vine?”

“!!!!”

This time, everyone including Mo Ran's eyes opened wide in disbelief.

Li Wuxin's voice shook as he spoke: “H-how did you know——unless it really was you, but... just what exactly is happening!?”

A golden light burst to life in Chu Wanning's palm, lengthening inch by inch until it coiled onto the floor, and as the glow dimmed down, a length of willow vine, leaves unfurled, appeared before the onlookers.

Chu Wanning was unfazed. At this point, he was already certain that the incident at Butterfly Town was done by the same person as those at Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs, so he said: “Li-zhuangzhu, the weapon in the box is this one, yes?”

“Y-yes.” Li Wuxin's voice nearly gave out on him.

The brocade box was opened, and inside was indeed a length of willow vine, exactly the same in every way.

Chu Wanning narrowed his eyes.

He was already suspicious when that “Jiangui” that was used to kill the feathered tribe folks and frame Mo Ran appeared at the Peach Blossom Springs; this confirmed his suspicions.

“Li-zhuangzhu, mind if I take a look at it?”

Li Wuxin mulled it over; things weren’t exactly going his way right now, it’d be best not to offend Chu Wanning any further. So he said: “Chu-zongshi is too polite, I’m only here to ask about the situation in the first place. Please feel free to look all you want, I’d be only too thrilled to get your thoughts on it, why would I ever refuse?”

But Chang-gongzi was less than thrilled to hear this; he came here to pick a fight and spent so much money getting Bitan Sect to back him up, what was this damned old man trying to do, switch sides now that he’d met some pushback?

He threw one meaningful look at Li Wuxin after another, each and every one an angry glare.

Li Wuxin paid him no heed, but Mo Ran noticed those looks from the side and mocked: “Chang-gongzi, are your eyes okay? You’ve been squeezing them an awful lot!”

Meanwhile, Chu Wanning took the willow vine from the box and looked over it in detail

Sure enough, although it was no different from Tianwen and Jiangui in appearance, its life force was extremely weak, nothing like that of a holy weapon with a master—this was clearly a “dead thing.”

“Heartpluck Willow...”

Xue Meng and his sharp hearing froze at these words: “What?”

“This piece of vine, and the ones used to kill the feathered tribe folks back at Peach Blossom Springs as well, they were all broken off of the Heartpluck Willow.” Chu Wanning replied.

“Ah!” Shi Mei called out, surprised, “So that’s what it is?”

“Back then at Jincheng Lake, before the old dragon passed, he said the fake Gouchen had a certain spell that required a strong wood elemental spirit to maintain. He had in all likelihood taken some branches from the holy tree before destroying Jincheng Lake. Although the spiritual power therein will gradually fade after the holy tree fell, it should still suffice for some time.”

Chu Wanning’s slender fingers traced the golden leaves.

“He even made full use of these ones that have been practically depleted of spiritual power, either as fake evidence in a set up, or else giving them to his puppeteered pawns as weapons.”

A flame ignited in his hand as he spoke. He held the vine that was a mirror image of Tianwen to the flame, and it caught fire instantly, the blaze reflecting in the eyes of the onlookers, some shocked, others stupefied.

“This is not my weapon.” Chu Wanning let it scorch the tip of the branch before closing his palm around the flame, extinguishing it. He tossed the willow vine aside and said, mildly, “Tianwen is possessed of abundant spiritual energy. Even the Sanmei True Fire couldn’t hope to burn it, much less an ordinary fire spell.”

Li Wuxin opened his mouth, then closed it. But then didn’t want to give up that easily, and opened it again.

“I’ve also heard about the Peach Blossom Springs incident. Word has it that Sisheng Peak’s Mo-gongzi murdered the Great Immortal Lord of the feathered tribe...”

"Oi, I didn't kill anyone." Mo Ran waved his hand.

Xue Zhengyong, visibly displeased, was unyielding on this matter: "As I've already explained to all the sects, that was not done by my nephew. Li-zhuangzhu, I won't be this polite the next time you bring it up."

His reaction seemed to have stirred something in Mo Ran's mind; he stilled, a flicker of something indiscernible flashing past those habitually smiling eyes. He muttered: "Uncle..."

Chu Wanning spoke: "The incident at Peach Blossom Springs was a set-up. The situation being what it was, I had no chance to defend my disciple's innocence at the time. But since you of Bitan Sect came all this way seeking the truth today, I can certainly tell you the whole story."

In the flickering light of the candle-lit lamps, Chu Wanning gave a concise summary of the events of Jincheng Lake and Peach Blossom Springs. By the time he finished, the disciples of Bitan Sect were all stunned speechless, and Li Wuxin was sweating so much his clothes were soaked through. He dithered for quite a while before saying: "Does Chu-zongshi mean to say that there's someone in the world at this very moment who has practically mastered the 'Zhenlong Chess Formation' of the three forbidden techniques?"

"That's correct."

"How could that be! That's a forbidden technique! Even the leader of the number one Rufeng Sect couldn't hope to acquire the scroll for a forbidden technique——"

Chu Wanning cut him off: "I spoke nothing but the truth. Whether or not you believe it is up to you."

"Impossible." Li Wuxin insisted with a pale face, and he laughed loudly through trembling lips, as if he could convince himself it was only a joke if he just laughed it off as one. "If there really is someone out there who has mastered the Zhenlong Chess Formation, the world will get thrown into disarray and everything in the upper and lower cultivation realms alike will be rewritten!"

Ex-Emperor Taxian-Jun Mo Ran was a little miffed: "That guy only 'knows' it, he hasn't 'mastered' it. If he had, do you really think things would still be this peaceful right now?"

Li Wuxin's whiskers quivered, and he was just about to say something when all of a sudden a sword flashed through the door and a Bitan disciple, covered in blood, stumbled off from the sword. The disciple threw up a mouthful of blood before turning his tear-streaked face up to Li Wuxin and crying: "Zhuangzhu, it's awful! The barrier you set around Butterfly Town broke! Vicious spirits rushed out, and my seniors used their own bodies to block them from escaping for the time being, but...all thirty of my shixiong who were guarding the barrier sacrificed themselves in order to hold back the vicious ghosts, leaving only me to come report..."

He drew in deep, shuddering breaths, and then suddenly started wailing.

"Zhuangzhu! Hurry and notify all the sects of the upper cultivation realm! All the dead people in that town are being controlled! It's a forbidden technique! A forbidden technique!!"

"What!!!!"

Li Wuxin stumbled backwards into a pillar, looking pale and haggard like a corpse dumped out of its coffin.

"There's no way we can hold it off with just us..." That disciple cried miserably, his tears washing the blood off his face, "Zhuangzhu!!"

Then, suddenly noticing Xue Zhengyong, he turned to grovel toward him as well.

"Xue-zhangmen, I'm begging, please go as well! All of my shixiong... I... how can I face them..." He continued rambling incoherently for a few moments, then suddenly closed his eyes and howled toward the sky in grief.

"They're all... all dead!!!!!"

The hall was deathly silent for a moment before bursting into an uproar.

Xue Zhengyong was level-headed in the face of disaster, immediately telling Madam Wang to go send messages to the other eight great sects of the upper cultivation realm, and sending Xue Meng to go gather the elders.

"Chu Wanning?"

"There's no time to waste, I'll head over first."

"But you don't know how to ride swords..."

Before Chu Wanning could respond, Mo Ran rushed over, eager to meet that "master" of Zhenlong Chess Formation.

"Don't worry Uncle, I'll take Shizun there."

Chu Wanning threw him a glance but said nothing, a silent assent.

The two of them walked out of the hall together. Shi Mei stood frozen in place for a while, pale-faced, before suddenly snapping out of it and saying: "Me too..."

But by the time he ran outside Loyalty Hall, they were already gone. Just then, Xue Zhengyong called him back, saying not to go running off alone, so he could only go find Xue Meng and wait to head off together with the second group.

As for Bitan Sect, Li Wuxin had lived a life of luxury all this time and never once ran into anything this big, but the old guy still wanted to save his face, so he drew in a breath to collect himself, then set about instructing people to take care of the messenger disciple and contact the elders of his own sect, gathering forces as well in preparation to make a good showing at Butterfly Town so as to regain some dignity.

The assembly set off grandly from Sisheng Peak, rushing through the sky toward Butterfly Town like hundreds of shooting stars. Standing on his sword at the head of the fleet as they flew through the clouds, Li Wuxin couldn't resist stealing a sidelong glance at those disciples of the lower cultivation realm's number one sect.

He never could have expected that he would one day head into battle alongside such rabble, the very people he had always looked down on, and his feelings were a bit complicated for a moment.

Travelling by sword, they crossed a thousand miles in no time, and as the clouds before them parted ways to reveal a stream of demonic light the color of blood shooting straight up into the sky, Li Wuxin had no more thought to spare for matters of the upper or lower cultivation realm—

Because floating in the sky was an enormous, flickering array of crimson light the size of the town itself, delineated neatly into the checkered pattern of a chessboard. And on that chessboard, like so many carved figurines, hovered the silhouettes of all the dead townsfolk; five hundred households, over one thousand people, looking like a dense forest of human flesh.

Li Wuxin cried out despite himself: "I-it really is... Zhenlong Chess Formation!"

Xue Zhengyong, expression dark, addressed Li Wuxin: "Li-zhuangzhu, I'll take my people to the southeast side, but we'll have to trouble you and yours to take care of the northwestern side. The other sects aren't here yet, we'll have to hold out for now."

There were more pressing matters right now than his use of the term "we", so Li Wuxin nodded: "Got it, got it."

Xue Zhengyong cupped his fist in his other hand toward him in a gesture of respect and led the disciples of Sisheng Peak down to land on the southeast side of Butterfly Town. The defensive barrier made of the flesh and blood of Bitan Sect's guarding disciples was already on the verge of collapse, the field of its spiritual energy barely holding out. And on the other side of the translucent barrier roamed masses of walking corpses.

"Chu Wanning!"

Seeing a man in drifting white robes beside another in blue-silver light armor standing in front, Xue Zhengyong called out: "What's the matter? Is the barrier irreparable?"

Chu Wanning had already been here for a while. Xue Zhengyong couldn't understand why the barrier was still in such a sorry state with the number one zongshi of barriers standing right there.

But he got no response from Chu Wanning. Xue Zhengyong was just about to call again when Mo Ran turned around and gestured at him to not.

"Uncle, shh. Come over here."

Xue Zhengyong walked over: "What is it?"

"Don't disturb him."

Mo Ran pointed at Chu Wanning.

Although standing, his eyes were closed and his hands were held pressed together, and his lips were completely colorless.

Xue Zhengyong started and reached out to feel the pulse at the side of his neck, then asked in alarm: "Soul Projection?"

"Yeah. It's all ghosts in there, couple thousand of them, but we couldn't find Luo Xianxian, so she's probably in the deeper parts of the town. We don't know what exactly is happening yet, or what the guy behind all this is plotting this time, so he went to go find Luo Xianxian to ask."

"She's already a vicious ghost gone berserk, what even is there to ask!" Xue Zhengyong smacked his leg in anger, "Reinforcing the barrier is more important right now!"

"Don't!" Mo Ran said sharply, "Shizun temporarily cast his soul out using Soul Projection precisely because it's all dead people in there, and this way he can go in covertly without alarming the enemy. If the barrier gets reinforced now, it'll get Shizun killed!"

"WHAT?!" Xue Zhengyong exclaimed in a panic, "You stay right here and keep an eye on him, I'll go tell Li Wuxin!"

Mo Ran nodded, then added: "I'll send up a blue colored signal as soon as Shizun's soul returns, then we can start mending the barrier from all directions. But before then, Uncle must absolutely not allow them to mend it, or it'll cause the thousands of ghosts to begin devouring in a frenzy, Shizun only has his soul in there, he won't be able to defend himself against that."

"I know, I know already!" Xue Zhengyong was already a distance away before he'd even finished his reply.

Mo Ran lifted his eyes toward that barrier on the brink of failure.

"There's not much time left. Shizun, you've found Luo Xianxian by now, right?"

He spoke in a quiet voice as he turned to look at him, and in his worry, reached out without thinking to close his hand around Chu Wanning's ice-cold one, wholly unaware of his own actions.

"Almost..."

Just then, Shi Mei touched down nearby alongside Xue Meng and the rest, but unexpectedly, when he looked up from the crowd, the sight that greeted him was that of the pair before the barrier with their hands entwined. He froze, color draining from his face, then bit down on his lip and slowly turned his head away.

Author's Notes:

⚠ Warning!

The content that follows will uncover the first wave of truths from the previous timeline, and will develop a crucial, climactic plot event. Both mains will be facing the important turning points in their lives in this lifetime, to give a weak hint, the last huge wave of knives for Shizun, and the first wave of knives for Mo Ran are coming. In order to keep the pace of the novel unaffected, until this arc ends, there won't be any mini theatres.

Promise me, that no matter what you read next, do not perform the dangerous stunt of voring Meatbun alive, thank you! Thank you! If you're unhappy about anything please vent it on 1.0 dog QAQ or form a dog-beating squad with Mengmeng...Meatbun is innocent = =

Thank you CEOs!!! Running away fearfully....

Ch.93 This Venerable One's Shizun, Who Dares Touch!

>>gore

Chu Wanning's living soul roamed the inside of the barrier.

Everywhere he went, he found the wandering of ghosts and the vague shadows of lost souls. But the strange thing was those mangled corpses—the heart had been dug out of every single one of them before death; their chests were empty, some with bits of artery and pieces of flesh drawn outside, others with the white of their ribcage visible.

He knew something was off, but the defensive barrier around Butterfly Town grew weaker with every passing moment and he couldn't afford to tarry. He sped toward the Chen Manor with all haste.

He arrived there to find four cauldrons, each half the height of a man, placed in the four cardinal directions outside the Chen Manor and giving off fumes that grew increasingly denser. Rather than the typical white, the fumes were respectively colored red, blue, brown, and gold.

Fires were lit under the cauldrons, each filled to the brim with blood, but once closer, he found masses upon masses of red-colored flesh piled up beneath the boiling blood.

Human hearts!

The cauldrons were stuffed full of the hearts that were missing from the bodies of the deceased!

"Sand Amassed Into Tower [Z]..."

Chu Wanning muttered to himself.

He suddenly understood why, even after having searched for so many days, they couldn't find any trace of that person's pursuit for the spiritual essence—that lunatic, to think he'd actually go this far!

Per this so called "Sand Amassed Into Tower", the hearts of hundreds of people with the same elemental are dug out and gathered together. By the resentment of the dead, the resulting power—while not as strong as that of a spiritual essence—would still be significant for a short amount of time.

But why Butterfly Town?
Why Luo Xianxian...

Stepping into the Chen Manor, its courtyards and halls in utter disarray and everything toppled over, he found Landlord Chen and Madam Chen hanging from the ceiling beams, both missing their hearts as well. But unlike the townspeople outside, they had not reanimated, for both of their bodies from the waist down had been ripped to threads by some savage force, the mutilated mess no longer bearing any resemblance to legs.

He made a round through the main hall and didn't find Luo Xianxian. Further in, inside the Chen family's ancestral shrine room, he saw a bowl of minced meat in front of each and every memorial tablet, as if in offering. Looking closer, there was half an eyeball mixed into the mince, and a segment of a finger...

Feeling nausea rise in his throat, Chu Wanning was just about to leave when a burst of crisp laughter came from above.

His eyes snapped upwards as the white paper lanterns swayed and the candles inside lit up one after the other.

Luo Xianxian sat on a ceiling beam, dressed in the vivid red of wedding robes and dangling a pair of feet bare and delicate like jade as she rocked gently back and forth, contemplating Chu Wanning with a tilted head.

"Uh-oh, you found me."

She giggled; Luo Xianxian looked no different, but behind that gleeful expression, her soul was nothing like the bashful girl Chu Wanning had met back then. Arrogant and unbridled, blazing like a flame, her eyes were big and round still, but they flickered now with a demonic red.

Luo Xianxian had demonized.

Tianwen could interrogate a ghost only once. Chu Wanning had already used it on her when he came to Butterfly Town to exorcise evil the first time, and so could not do so again. The only thing he could do now was to suppress the demonic nature within her soul, call back her original consciousness, and ask her then.

Chu Wanning spoke, "Luo Xianxian, why are you here?"
But hidden inside his sleeve, he was already preparing to unleash a spell.

"Pft," the petite girl spat. "I feel like it, not that it's any of your business."

Chu Wanning shook his head, eyebrows knitting even tighter until it looked like there was a scar carved between his brows.

"Over there in the bowl, is that Chen Bo'huan's younger brother?"

"Oh, him," Luo Xianxian couldn't care less. "Only the row on the left. The row on the right is that little Yao bitch."

".....!"

"Of all the men out there, she just had to try and steal *my* husband, just cause she's the governor's daughter. Getting chopped into mincemeat is exactly what she deserves!"

Luo Xianxian had already lost it completely by this point; her temperament was nothing like that in life, and she couldn't recognize the man before her as the "Yanluo-gege" who once fought to requite her.

Chu Wanning's heart dropped upon hearing that Chen-Yao had also met the same fate. In a low voice, he inquired, "Then...the young daughter of the Chens..."

"She was kind to me, I wouldn't treat her poorly."

Luo Xianxian smiled as she spoke, her lips vibrantly red as if painted with blood.

Rubbing her belly, she said smilingly:

"That's why she's in here."

"I ate her. This way little sis will always be with me, and no one will be able to bully her."

"...You've truly gone mad."

A blinding light burst to life in his palm even as he spoke, the flash of golden brilliance instantly illuminating the whole room. Chu Wanning leapt up and flung a curse onto her forehead as she yelled in surprise.

Demonic screeching filled the room!

Chu Wanning acted with speed and purpose, promptly drawing ten golden chains in an instant to bind her.

He pressed the tips of pale, slender fingers to the center of her brow, his eyes flickering with fire and lightning, his expression dark as thunderous clouds.

His thin, lightly-colored lips parted slightly as he silently chanted an incantation.

Luo Xianxian's eyes bulged outwards and saliva dripped from the corner of her lips, her originally pretty face twisting into something terrifying in the chanting, "Shut up! Let me go! Blood for blood, I've done nothing wrong!"

Chu Wanning paid her no heed, eyes cool and downcast as the light at his fingertips grew brighter still.

"AAH——!" Luo Xianxian began to shriek hysterically. "Let me go! LET ME GO!!! MY HEAD! IT HURTS! I CAN'T TAKE IT ANYMORE!!!!!!"

She screamed and wailed, but then suddenly stopped, a sinister crimson lighting up her eyes as the corner of her lips quirked up eerily.

She snickered lightly.

"Is that what you were hoping to hear?"

"!!"

Phoenix eyes widening, Chu Wanning pulled back his hand and leapt backwards in the same instant.

In a flurry of white, he dodged Luo Xianxian's Soul-Shattering Strike just in time, the silk of his robes settling gently around him as he landed a distance away on the veranda.

Luo Xianxian stood up slowly, no sign whatsoever of the faked agony just now. The Purification Spell actually had no effect on her; instead, she seemed even stronger than before!

"Did you really think a measly Purification Spell could do anything to me?"
Luo Xianxian sneered.

"I've devoured the life force of this town's thousand-odd people, and am now on the cusp of cultivating a body of flesh. Then I'll go take my husband back from the netherworld, and we'll leave this place and be inseparable. How could I possibly let you ruin it for me on the final stretch!?"

Her original nature was gone; all that she knew now was her desire to be with Chen Bo'huan forever.

An idea occurred to Chu Wanning. He asked in a low voice, "Who told you you could cultivate a body this way?"

"What's it to you?"

Chu Wanning replied coldly, "Whoever it was, he lied to you. Your original body is already no more, the only way to acquire another is through the cycle of reincarnation. There is no such thing as achieving rebirth by consuming the life force of a thousand people. He tricked you into slaughtering all the townspeople only to gather their hearts for his own ends."

"...!!" Luo Xianxian's eyes widened. "Impossible! He wouldn't lie to me!"

"Who is 'he'?"

"He...he's..." She mumbled over and over, then clutched her head shrieking, "I don't know! I DON'T KNOW! I want a body! I want to live!! I DON'T WANT TO DIE!!!!!! He didn't lie to me... he didn't lie to me... you're the one that's lying... that's right, you're the one lying!!!!!"

A swoosh of red silk, and the ghost was rushing toward Chu Wanning with her claws extended!

Just then, an ominous sound thundered from the skies above. Chu Wanning dodged Luo Xianxian's attack and looked up to find a long, narrow crack in the defensive barrier, ripped through by the overwhelming resentful energy of the town. The life energy of those outside seeped in through the crack, and all throughout the town came the roars of the undead!

The barrier was about to break.
He was out of time!
If he doesn't recover Luo Xianxian's consciousness soon, he'll have no choice but to kill her.
And then there went their last lead...

Outside the barrier, Li Wuxin looked up at that horrifying crack in midair and yelled toward Xue Zhengyong, "Are we still not mending the barrier?! We gotta mend it! If it breaks and the thousand-some walking dead all come rushing out, we won't be able to hold them back!!"

"Just a little while longer!" Xue Zhengyong's expression wasn't much better, large droplets of sweat beading on his forehead. "Don't mend it just yet, Yuheng is still inside. Just wait a little while longer."

Li Wuxin cursed under his breath, his heart beating wildly at the sight of that barrier cracked like an egg. He snarled, "And how much blood do you think will be spilt if the barrier fails?! How will you answer to the entire cultivation world then!" Then he whipped around to yell at his disciples, "Have the messages been sent yet? When will the other sects get here?!"

The disciple in charge of messages was drenched in nervous sweat. "The other eight great sects all said that this is a serious matter that must first be reported to their respective sect leaders, and that the sect leaders and elders will have to discuss things before they can send any aid."

"....." Li Wuxin's face darkened even more. "What about Rufeng Sect? Nangong-xianzhang has always been mettlesome, surely he isn't so spineless?"

"Uhm..." The disciple was at a loss for words when the communication talisman suddenly started glowing. He quickly read it and announced, overjoyed, "Rufeng Sect is coming! They just sent word that they're sending people over right now!"

Sure enough, within ten minutes, a wave of blue clouds appeared on the horizon, which, once closer, were not clouds at all, but a drove of nearly a thousand strong, each donning blue mantles emblazoned with the heron, flying through the sky on swords lined up in impeccable formation.

And, at their head, were Nangong Si and Ye Wangxi.

Nangong Si rode in astride his faewolf Naobaijin, jaded bow on his arm and full quiver across his back, an imposing air about him, the arrogance and intemperance of youth writ clear on his face.

Ye Wangxi was dressed all in black as before, with a cloak embroidered with the heron of Rufeng Sect on top, looking seven parts handsome, three parts beautiful.

"What is this?!"

Nangong Si saw the sorry state of the barrier and immediately blew up, his furious gaze scanning the crowd and skipping right over the people from Sisheng Peak of the lower cultivation realm to land on the sect leader of Bitan Sect, the only one here even remotely fit to be addressed by him.

"Li Wuxin! Do you not see that crack in the barrier? What are you lot doing just standing around, don't you know to mend it?!"

Li Wuxin was Nangong Si's senior by far, but Nangong Si was the sole heir of the foremost sect in the cultivation world, so he could only grin and bear it even as his entire face flushed red under the admonishment.

"Young master Nangong, little do you know, but the barrier remains in disrepair only at Xue-zhangmen's insistence..."

And with that, the hot potato was tossed to Xue Zhengyong.

"Sisheng Peak?"

Nangong Si glanced at Xue Zhengyong and let out a hmpf, perhaps in contempt or perhaps something else.

Then he waved his hand and turned to speak to his personal attendant, "Just go patch the shitty pot up, all this yammering almost had me thinking it was something serious."

Ye Wangxi tried to stop him, "Young master——"

But Nangong Si wouldn't even spare him a glance. And, even stranger, Song Qiutong was here as well, face shrouded behind a layer of white silk and eyes

downcast, looking demure and obedient as before, but today she stood with Nangong Si rather than Ye Wangxi.

Rufeng Sect was nothing if not expeditious, and obeyed none but their own leaders. Especially those personal attendants of Nangong Si's, the lot of them stepping up in sync, completely ignoring any and all explanations as they immediately set about laying down the seals and arrays to mend the barrier.

"WAIT!"

Xue Zhengyong had only just interrupted four or five people's attempts, yet when he turned around, there was another already forming the mending seal and sending it flying in a streak of blue light toward the crack in the barrier.

Blood drained from Xue Zhengyong's face as he yelled, "YUHENG!!!!"

There was a sudden *BANG!* And sparks flew everywhere.

At the very last second, just as the seal was about to reach the crack, it was cleaved apart by a flash of crimson like a bolt of blood-red lightning!

All heads snapped up collectively to see a young man with a length of willow vine in hand, guarding the barrier where he stood on his sword in mid air. His features were bright and friendly, as if naturally shrouded with warmth, but right now his eyes were sharp and unyielding, gaze alight like the flaring leaves of the vine raised in his hand, coursing with a light the color of blood and erupting with sparks.

High above them in the air, Mo Ran's brows were drawn low in a frown as he spoke darkly, "Didn't I fucking say that no one is to touch this barrier? Are y'all newbs deaf or stupid?!"

He loathed Chu Wanning, but that was between the two of them.

Be it the past life or this one, on pain of death, he absolutely will not allow anyone other than himself to touch so much as a hair on Chu Wanning.

He's said it before—he's the only one allowed to kill the one he hated, the only one allowed to wreck him, to torment him.

In his fit of rage, he couldn't help the savagery of his past life from rearing its head, bleeding through into his demeanour and making it deviate completely from his usual playful and easy-going young master attitude.

Xue Zhengyong, Xue Meng, and even Shi Mei were taken aback by this display of his, to say nothing of those of Rufeng Sect.

Author's Notes:

1.0 Dog is pretty much possessed by 0.5 Dog near the end in this chapter, he reclaimed his bastard energy hahaha, we'll count him as 0.75 Dog~

Ch.94 This Venerable One Sees the Heavenly Rift Again

>>mild violence and gore for the rest of book 1

Nangong Si looked displeased, his gaze dark like rolling, molten iron.

The line of his sight scanned past and paused for a moment on Mo Ran's blazing red Holy Weapon before it moved on.

"Who's that?"

"He's the gongzi from Sisheng Peak, surname Mo," Ye Wangxi replied.

"Mo?" Nangong Si knitted his brows slightly. "The one that was picked up off the streets some years ago?"

"En."

Nangong Si gave Ye Wangxi a side-eyed glance. "You know him?"

"We resided in the same place at Peach Blossoms Springs."

Nangong Si sneered. Who knew what that meant, but when Ye Wangxi saw his reaction, his quietly handsome face paled some, eyelashes dropping, then he pursed his lips and fell silent.

"Since he has to keep waiting then I might as well grant him some face," Nangong Si said. "A master of a Holy Weapon at such a young age, I gotta see what he's made of."

Mo Ran, however, had no time to mind the Rufeng Sect. He turned around, his robes whipping in the wind. The barrier had already cracked, there wasn't much time left——

Chu Wanning, are you not done yet?

SHA! Luo Xianxian's nails ripped through the silk curtain. The white cloth fluttered and the plain fabric was shaken into thousands of pieces of falling snow.

Chu Wanning only sensed an incredibly familiar presence, but he couldn't quite put his finger on it. He widened his eyes. "Tianwen?!"

No.

It wasn't Tianwen.

But when he parried with her, there was an energy that was incredibly similar to Tianwen coming from her person.

The inner curtains of the huge Chen household were like a thin mist, locking within it a living soul, a vicious ghost. After having exchanged a dozen moves, the fog in Chu Wanning's mind dispersed, and a thought struck him, waking him up. Suddenly, he understood.

"Heartpluck Willow..."

Luo Xianxian was already dead, her body cremated to ashes. Back then, she could only depend on old Madame Chen's body in order to haunt, so there was no reason why she should be able to show her true form now.

That mysterious man had taken a withered branch of the Heartpluck Willow and temporarily fabricated a shell for her, allowing for her soul to come back.

The broiled hearts of the people outside and the steaming haze of fumes. Metal, Water, Fire, Earth, they were all waiting for Xianxian's 'Wood', the body of the Heartpluck Willow.

Just what was that man planning!

Had he gone through all this trouble just to have Luo Xianxian regain her flesh body so she could slaughter her way into the Ghost Realm to be with Chen Bo'huan once more? Who would do all this for her?

All her relatives had died.
Relatives...

A relative!!!

Something stirred in Chu Wanning's mind, and his blood boiled and rushed. He suddenly recalled, back when he first met Luo Xianxian, she had told him something—

She had a brother, who'd gone missing many years ago...

Was it him?

"All in my path shall die!"

Luo Xianxian was a real flesh body, Chu Wanning was a living soul. While her spiritual powers were nowhere near his, when solid met air they were evenly matched for the moment.

In the blink of an eye, her blood red nails came lunging towards his heart. In order for his soul not to suffer damage, Chu Wanning abruptly dodged, then flipped his hand and tapped between her brows.

"It's useless. You can do it however many times you want, but the purification spell can't hurt me!" She laughed savagely, throwing her head back to howl to the heavens, and summoned from all around them bands of corpses from Butterfly Town.

"You feral ghosts, obey my command! Gather here and drink blood til there is no more!"

Terrifying wails and howling started to ring. Butterfly Town had been trampled to complete pandemonium, and the berserking, heartless undead all came rushing to the Chen Manor when they heard her call.

The walking corpses came pouring like a flood, shrieking and roaring like crashing waves dying in the howling winds. The blood-curdling cries were like the screams of a battlefield, and in an instant, all could hear them clearly, inside and outside the barrier.

Outside the barrier, the cultivators were shaken.
Inside, Chu Wanning battled all alone.

There was only his silhouette, his lone soul, a streak of white standing before Luo Xianxian. She was laughing in glee, madness and wretchedness filling the depths of her eyes. But a gentleman was like a bamboo, and he remained unfazed in the face of hundreds of ghosts. Only his brows were furrowed deeply, a layer of gloom shadowing over his eyes.

"Luo Xianxian, do you still remember what you once told me?"

"Hm?" She didn't seem to expect he'd ask this, and was slightly taken aback.

In her daze, Chu Wanning had already flapped open his sleeves and leapt onto the top of the courtyard of the Chen Manor. His silk boots, untainted and pristine, landed upon the edge of the black sandalwood eaves.

"You once told me you never wanted to become a vicious ghost, and you also said you didn't want to hurt anyone."

As his voice dropped, winds from all around picked up.

Chu Wanning raised his gaze and looked over, and saw a heavy black troop of corpses pouring in from every direction. He knitted his brows slightly and suddenly swung an expansive sleeve, the haunting winds whipping the robes of this living soul.

Between his hands, there was suddenly a golden glow.

"Please excuse my offense."

All of a sudden, thousands of willow vines pulled out from the ground!!

Blood flowed all over Butterfly Town, dead corpses covered the ground, and in an instant, millions of gashes opened, thick and strong roots of willow trees broke through the earth one after the other! They glowed a blinding gold, appearing like millions of chains, and bound every fleeing corpse!

Chu Wanning's eyes were closed, his long hair a whipping mess before a face as cold as melting snow in a stream.

He called darkly, "Tianwen, Ten Thousand Coffins."

Then his eyes flashed open, blazing like lightning.

Those rows upon rows of golden drooping willows suddenly flashed brilliantly, and countless branches started sprouting out and growing in dense numbers, trapping those walking corpses that were still roaring and struggling. Then right after, a gap cracked open in every willow tree, and as the hole widened, the trees dragged all the dead into the gaping hole before brutally sealing them within.

Ten Thousand Coffins.

The largest drooping willow emerged from the courtyard of the Chen's household, and fast like the sharpest arrow, it chased after the dodging Luo Xianxian.

However, that Luo Xianxian had a body made from the Heartpluck Willow herself; Heartpluck Willow, Tianwen, Jiangui, they were all born of the same body, all seeds Gouchen-shanggong had brought to the mortal realm from the heavens, and so the Ten Thousand Coffins of Tianwen couldn't immediately catch up to the small and swift shadow of Luo Xianxian.

Her vividly red robes, embroidered with a golden phoenix, rolled in the winds like waves as the giant willow followed after her, pulling taller and taller, breaking through the barrier and gunning straight for the skies.

Outside the barrier, the entire crowd was shocked into silence by this sky-shattering tree; there were some with weaker spiritual powers who already couldn't hang on, their legs going weak by the Zongshi's oppressive presence, and they fell to their knees soundly.

The willow tree that sprouted with the spirit of Tianwen grew taller and taller, almost to the point where it could reach the moon. Chu Wanning had unleashed his spiritual powers to a point he never had before; there were already cultivators around Butterfly Town whose eyes were bloodshot, and even Nangong Si, with his cultivation, was having difficulties breathing, his chest tight and his heart beating rapidly.

Nangong Si gritted his teeth. "A character like this exists at Sisheng Peak? Yuheng Elder?"

Next to him, Li Wuxin was calm; he was the head of a sect after all, so he could still hang on. "Nangong-gongzi, this man is Chu Wanning, I'm telling you!"

"WHAT?!"

Under such heavy oppression, Nangong Si was dumbstruck, letting out an "ugh" as he spat out a mouthful of blood.

"It's Chu... Zongshi?"

"Young Master, please don't speak anymore."

Seeing him hurt, Ye Wangxi raised his hand and pressed on two meridian points on Nangong Si's body, helping him circulate his spiritual powers. Yet unexpectedly, Nangong Si wasn't grateful in the slightest, and roughly pushed him away, wiping hatefully at the blood on his lips, "Don't touch me."

"..."

"Ye-gongzi, allow me." Song Qiutong was a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast so she wasn't greatly affected. She came forward gracefully, her pair of eyes delicate and scared as she gazed at Ye Wangxi, nominating herself in a small voice.

However, Ye Wangxi didn't seem to be as friendly as he was when they first met, and actually ignored her.

Having received the cold shoulder, Song Qiutong turned her head to gaze at Nangong Si with her watery eyes. Nangong Si's attitude towards her had become much better since the beginning, but he also declined. "Your help isn't needed. I was just shocked by someone I haven't seen in many years. I'm not that weak, if you have the free time, go help other people."

Over on this side, Mo Ran didn't notice at all the things that were happening between Song Qiutong and the two gongzi of Rufeng.

He'd dropped next to Chu Wanning's empty body, lifting his head to watch Chu Wanning's living soul engaged in the heat of battle with Luo Xianxian. Then he looked at that band of corpses temporarily sealed by thousands of willow trees, his heart and mind both alarmed and nervous.

It must be known that to use a spell like this, even under normal circumstances it'd exhaust spiritual powers greatly. Never mind that Chu Wanning's soul was currently out of body?

Just how unpredictably strong was this man's ability...

Before he could finish his thought, there was a sudden splitting cry.

The Heartpluck Willow couldn't defeat Tianwen after all, and beneath the lonely moon, Luo Xianxian was bound by the willow vine, branches and leaves sprouting so fast she was swallowed rapidly. That gigantic, sky-reaching tree enveloped her in its gap before that ancient willow that had crossed the clouds finally, slowly, shrank down towards the ground, gradually descending below, until it finally stood equal once more with the other ancient great trees.

At this point the barrier had been completely shattered, however, since the Ten Thousand Coffins formed by Tianwen were still keeping all the walking corpses hostage, there was no immediate danger.

Xue Zhengyong didn't dare to relax, and ordered the rest of the people of Sisheng Peak to stand guard before every willow tree just in case. As for the others, they all followed the flow and dashed straight for the courtyard of the Chen Manor. Since the situation was dire, Mo Ran didn't think too much as he immediately swept up Chu Wanning's cold body and rushed over too.

When the group arrived, the ancient willow chaining Luo Xianxian had already transformed into a solid coffin. She lay within, her expression sometimes savage, sometimes sad, her eyes sometimes vicious, sometimes aggrieved.

From her lips, two separate voices continued to switch between one another, one full of madness as it shouted, "WHY DO YOU OBSTRUCT ME!! WHY OBSTRUCT ME! YOU ALL DESERVE DEATH! ALL OF YOU!!"

The other was soft and helpless. "Yanluo-gege, is it you... is it you who's come? Please I beg you... Save me... I don't want to hurt people... Please..."

Those two voices changed between each other, and after a long while, dead silence fell within the coffin.

At this point, the spiritual power of Chu Wanning's living soul was already at its limit, barely holding on. Yet, relying on his will alone, he pressed his fingers between the brows of the girl inside the coffin.

"Who are you?"

The closed eyes of the female ghost slowly opened, and it was still vivid red within.

Li Wuxin blurted, "Not good!!"

Just as he was about to charge forward to take the maiden's life, Chu Wanning pointed into the air and a strike of lightning dropped down, blocking his way.

"CHU WANNING, YOU——!"

Chu Wanning ignored him, and only stared at the delicate girl who slowly sat up from within the coffin.

She opened her blood red eyes, yet there was not a trace of killing intent in them, instead they were full of panic and loss as she answered softly, "I am Luo Xianxian."

When Chu Wanning heard her answer, he finally breathed in relief, dropping his lashes as his living soul dispersed.

A moment later, the man in Mo Ran's arms softly twitched, and Mo Ran quickly put him down, letting him lean against a colonnade on the side. He bent one knee to the ground, kneeling to be at his level and spoke, "Shizun, you're back?"

Chu Wanning's phoenix eyes were dazed, and it took a moment before they slowly focused.

He glanced at Mo Ran. He'd exhausted too much of his spiritual powers and was a man with a weak spiritual core, and so he appeared somewhat weak, the colours of his face no better than when his soul had been out of his body, still equally pale.

"En..." Chu Wanning responded, and leaned where he was for a moment before slowly rising to his feet using the colonnade as support.

With slow steps he came before Luo Xianxian, and dropped his eyes to gaze at her.

Luo Xianxian opened her tiny mouth a little, watching him in shock. "Yanluo-gege... Why am I here? W-what happened?"

"Other things aside." While Chu Wanning was physically weak, his eyes were still bright and sharp, and he cut straight to the subject. "Tell me, who was the one who fabricated your body? This is an important matter, do you remember?"

"I..."

Chu Wanning waited, but because of nervousness, his nails dug into the stone colonnade, nearly to the point of breaking.

"It's not very clear, but there are some impressions..." Luo Xianxian mumbled. "It was a man, he... he..."

Next to them, Xue Meng was also getting impatient. "Think harder!"

Luo Xianxian strenuously tried to recall her memories. "At the time, everything was in a daze, I really didn't see his face clearly, but I heard his voice, he's got a bit of a northern accent... It seems to be... it seems to be..."

"AH!!" She suddenly exclaimed, terror filling her face. "I remember now! It's him! IT'S HIM!!! THE CLEMENTINES!! THE CLEMENTINE THIEF!!!"

"What clementines, what nonsense..." Xue Meng grumbled.

However, Chu Wanning instantly understood—— What she meant was that madman who chopped off the clementine tree she bumped into when she was young!

There was a man from Linyi whose heart died at twenty.

Who was it...

Linyi, it couldn't be Rufeng Sect, could it?

Was it...

Yet right then, a sharp crash of thunder suddenly exploded in the sky, and the Zhenlong Chess Formation that enveloped the entire sky above Butterfly Town flashed red.

"Not good!" Xue Zhengyong instantly shouted. "Keep watch on the Ten Thousand Coffins at your sides!! The formation creator has probably noticed by now, something's gonna happen!!!"

Right at that instant, sand flew and debris rolled, smoke and dust began to rise from all around.

All the cultivators were on high alert, their backs against one another, holding their long swords before them.

Chu Wanning's eyes darkened, and he turned to Luo Xianxian. "Get up! There's a white piece from that man left in your body, don't be controlled by him any longer, I'll help you purge it. Once the white piece falls, you must leave immediately. Go to the Underworld and return to the cycle of reincarnation, you must not linger in the mortal realm!"

Chu Wanning stopped. There was a sudden chill that rushed to his head, sparking in a flash. His gut instincts sensed danger, and he shouted to Luo Xianxian, "Leave, quickly!"

But it was too late.

"AH!!!!"

There was a sharp scream.

From the heart of the Zhenlong Chess Formation in the sky above came a blood red light, and it struck like lightning right onto the willow vine-made body of Luo Xianxian.

RUMBLE!

Firelight roared to the skies!

"Luo Xianxian!"

The silhouette of the girl quickly contorted in the sea of fire, and in a split second, a wisp of a fragrant soul rose to the skies, mixing together with the thick fumes that stank of burning.

The soul mingled with the fumes, the fumes and the soul forming one entity.

Where Luo Xianxian once stood, there was suddenly a stream of jade-green light that shot toward the heavens.

"A spiritual essence of the wood element?!"

In an instant, all blood left Chu Wanning's face, and his eyes turned extremely hostile. He'd been thinking about this wrong——He'd been thinking about this whole thing the wrong way!! Whilst alive, Luo Xianxian must've been someone who possessed great wood-elemental spiritual energy. The culprit behind the scenes wasn't trying to raise a wood element Heartpluck Willow with Metal Fire Water and Earth, but instead he was waiting for enough resentment to gather to form that crash of thunder, have it strike upon Luo Xianxian's body and have her resentful spirit become the temporary source for the Heartpluck Willow!

Metal Wood Water Fire Earth, all five spirits were now complete.

He could now do whatever he wanted to...

Chu Wanning lifted his head to look to the sky. Everyone was looking at the sky. Everything stopped; in that moment it was terrifyingly quiet.

Then, all of a sudden.

The earth started to quake!!

It was practically the same as what they had once seen in the ancient city of Lin'an, in the illusion at Peach Blossoms Springs.

Above Butterfly Town, a gigantic purplish black rift ripped open across the skies. Inside, it seemed to hold endless, bloody chaos, death, pestilence, and hatred, like the eye of the devil himself as it slowly opened.

Li Wuxin pointed at that rift and yelled with a trembling voice, “The Infinite Hells— The barrier to the Infinite Hells— It’s— it’s broken!!!!”

“The heavenly dome above Butterfly Town has been torn, the door to the Ghost Realm is open!!”

Ch.95 This Venerable One's Calamity From His Past Life

That thin layer separating the world of the Yin from that of the Yang was already far from the sturdy barrier it had once been in ancient times, and the occasional tears and gaps were common occurrences that hardly even warranted any alarm at all from the cultivation world.

But right now, a bloody eye had ripped straight across the heavens, instantly casting the sky and the earth alike in an unnatural, eerie hue as debris whipped through the air.

A once-in-a-generation calamity, the Heavenly Rift!

With the exception of Mo Ran, none present had ever personally experienced such an immense catastrophe. And so, be it Li Wuxin with his head of white hair, Xue Zhengyong who had been through countless battles, Rufeng Sect of the upper cultivation realm, or Sisheng Peak of the lower cultivation realm, every single one of the thousand-some people gathered here were stunned, at a complete loss for what to do.

But Mo Ran was even more horrified, as if struck by lightning; he could practically feel the thick stench of blood from the past life washing over him, the ruthless massacre, the endless spilling of blood——

This was it! That very same Heavenly Rift!

In the previous lifetime, this was when Shi Mei died. He was working to repair the barrier together with Chu Wanning, but due to having limited spiritual energy, he was counterattacked by the masses of ghosts and demons spilling forth, and fell from high above...

But that clearly wasn't supposed to happen yet, not for another three years! Mo Ran remembered that snowy night with such clarity—it was right after New Year's Eve, there were pieces of red scattered across the snowy ground from spent firecrackers, and the faint smell of smoke still lingered in the air. He had only just celebrated the New Year with everyone else the night before, indulged in the Tusu Wine reserved for the occasion.

Mo Ran looked up, slightly tipsy.

Under the warm light of the candle, Shi Mei's eyes were like the waters of spring, tender and affectionate from every angle.

Sisheng Peak was alive with laughter and merriment.

He had thought, back then, that this was wonderful. That even if he ends up never making a move on the one he liked, he'd be content just to stay by his side for the rest of his life and look at him from a distance, just like this.

The festivities came to a close and the disciples headed back in scattered groups. He and Shi Mei left from Mengpo Hall together, the moonlight reflected on the snowy ground lighting their way. Shi Mei looked a little cold, so he took off his outer robe and draped it across the other's shoulders without a word. And, emboldened by the alcohol in his system, he snuck a couple glances more than usual.

Beauty like fresh snow, pure and untouchable.

"A-Ran."

"Hm?"

"You drank a little too much today."

"Haha, did I?" Mo Ran laughed a little, but the rest of the laughter died in his throat.

Because Shi Mei had cupped his face with his slightly cold hands, making his already warm cheeks burn even hotter. Mo Ran's eyes opened wide, and a tremor ran through his body.

Shi Mei said with a smile, "Mhm, look at you, only three cups and your face is all red."

"I-It's just kinda hot."

Mo Ran scratched his head goofily, his face burning up even more.

He had been so easily satisfied back then, simply liking someone, not needing to have his feelings returned, not daring to dream of more.

That person had only touched his face, and he already felt like he had been blessed by the heavens, staring in a daze as words abandoned him.

His inky black eyes were watery with amazement and gratitude.

They bid each other goodnight in front of the disciple quarters. Before leaving, Shi Mei had turned to smile toward him, draped in his robe and backlit by the beautiful glow of moonlight against the snow.

"A-Ran."

He was already about to leave, but he whipped around like a spinning top in an almost panicked haste at the sound of his name, for fear that he might miss something.

"Y-yes!"

"Thanks for lending me your robe."

"It's nothing! I'm hot anyway!"

"And," Shi Mei's gaze grew even softer, so warm it could almost chase away the long winter, "A-Ran, actually, I..."

Bang!

A firework exploded in the distance.

Mo Ran didn't catch what he said; or perhaps Shi Mei didn't actually say anything more.

By the time things quieted down again, Shi Mei was already pushing open the door to his room.

Mo Ran called out in a panic, "Wait, what did you say just now?"

But Shi Mei was uncharacteristically teasing, blinking his eyes as he replied, "Good things can only be said once."

"Shi Mei——"

But that soul-alluring person did not acquiesce, speaking with only the lower half of his elegant face visible from beneath the cold-proofing curtain.

Bearing a soft smile that Mo Ran would remember for the rest of his life.

"It's late, I'm going to bed. If I still feel like telling you in the morning."

He paused, soft lashes drooping like leaves of the mimosa plant.

"I'll tell you then..."

But who could have known that morning would bring with it the Heavenly Rift.

In the end, Mo Ran never got to hear what Shi Mei had to say, and the most tender dream of his life was dyed a bloody scarlet.

How many times had he dreamt of that smile on Shi Mei's face behind the half-rolled curtain, of how beautiful and gentle it had been; he couldn't be sure if he was seeing things, but he felt like that smile held boundless feelings.

Time and again for the rest of his painful life, he dreamt the rest of that dream.

In his dream, Shi Mei would say that he liked him, and he would wake up grinning, happy, so happy that for a moment he would even forget that Shi Mei was dead, that there was already no turning back.

Grinning happily, he would think about the rest of their life, think about what delicious foods to make for his beloved person, such important things were worth putting some thought into, after all.

But then, grinning and grinning, tears would start to roll.

He buried his face in his hands.

He'll never know the words that scattered into the wind on that snowy New Year's Eve.

Ripping through thousands of miles of heavy clouds, the Infinite Hells opened.

Countless evil spirits and demonic fiends poured forth from the rift like a legion set to besiege a city. Screams from all around him jolted Mo Ran abruptly from his memories.

Nearly crazed, he shouted frantically, pushing through the chaotic, surging crowd, beside himself with panic, searching——

"Shi Mei!!!!!"

"Shi Mei——!!! Shi Mingjing!!!"

"Where are you? Where are you?"

I don't know why the Heavenly Rift came three years early.

I don't know if I can protect you the way I am right now.

But I can't bear to see you get hurt again, can't bear to watch you die again...

Please, live...

It's my fault, for not getting strong enough to protect you right away, I was stupid, didn't think things through, didn't consider that this might happen, where are you...

"A-Ran..."

Between the clashing of weapons, he heard a faint voice.

"Shi Mei!!!!"

There he was, next to Xue Meng, shielding them against the onslaught of evil spirits with a screen of water. Mo Ran ran toward him, unheeding of everything else, his throat tight and his eyes stinging.

"You damn mutt, get over here already and help out!" Xue Meng fought with the might of ten men, but the waves of corpses were a ceaseless tide, and more and more sweat appeared on his forehead as he said through gritted teeth, "Hurry up!"

He didn't need to say any more; Mo Ran leapt into the air and there was a flash of red as Jiangui answered the summon.

He brandished the willow vine, and the holy weapon destroyed an entire row of the vicious ghosts in one lash, turning them instantly into dust. Mo Ran turned his head to yell toward Shi Mei, "Stay close, come here behind me!"

"I want to go help Shizun..."

"DO NOT!!!!!!" The words struck pure fear into Mo Ran's heart!

He absolutely would not allow Shi Mei to go anywhere near Chu Wanning in this fight, not this time.

His memories from the past life overlaid and blended with the sight before him now.

—Back then, he had said the same thing.

"I want to go help Shizun..."

"Alright, hurry over, it'll be safer over there with Shizun, stay with him and let him protect you."

How absurd...

Let him protect you.

Chu Wanning, Chu Wanning, Mo Ran planned and calculated for every possibility, but he had forgotten to consider that that person was Chu Wanning!

Cold-blooded and heartless.

Head full of "the common people", but not a single care to spare his own dying disciple!

"Don't go over there! He can take care of himself!"

His entire head felt numb from the overlapping visions of two lifetimes. Eyes bloodshot, Mo Ran roared toward Shi Mei, "DON'T GO ANYWHERE, STAY RIGHT HERE!"

"But Shizun used up so much of his strength just now..."

"He'll live! Just worry about yourself!"

Scowling darkly, he directed another powerful lash at the surging waves of undead as he spoke, sending flesh and blood flying and chunks of brain splashing to the ground.

His current level of spiritual power was a far cry from what it had been in his past life, but the forms and movements came to him easy like second nature—after all, his body had been through countless battles, had crossed blades with

the likes of Ye Wangxi and Chu Wanning. He fought on, undaunted even against the millions of savage undead.

The rift in the sky grew bigger and bigger.

The fiends that had been confined within the Infinite Hells for hundreds of years poured into the mortal realm like a violent deluge, mixing with the walking corpses of Butterfly Town that had struggled free of the willow vines on the strength from the sudden influx of Yin energy. The situation grew increasingly terrifying and out of control, frenzied and frantic like a pot of boiling oil with water poured into it. The ghosts and demons grabbed living people and tore into them with abandon like a swarm of locust descending on a field of crops; those from Sisheng Peak were used to demonic encounters in their daily operations and could still hold out, but the same could not be said for Rufeng Sect and Bitan Sect as countless ones of their cultivators screamed, blood spurting high into the air!

Chu Wanning was too far away for Mo Ran to see how things were on his side.

But he caught sight of Ye Wangxi and Nangong Si amongst the masses of people. They may not get along, but their fighting styles were strikingly similar

He saw Ye Wangxi toss aside his sword to summon a long bow in a flash of blue light, while Nangong Si's bow was like a crescent moon in his hand. They exchanged a glance before dashing past one another to take one side each, aiming at the densest gatherings of undead corpses and drawing their bows back to the fullest.

Woosh!

They released at practically the same time, the white of the arrow fletchings slashing through the skies with a sound like the screeching of birds.

Tempered with spiritual power, the arrows were shrouded by blades of cutting wind as they flew through the air, ripping right through any fiends in their way...

Looking quite pleased with himself, Nangong Si reached back for another arrow.

But the quiver on his back was empty.

"Out already?"

"Here."

Before he even had the time to get mad, Ye Wangxi had already tossed him another bundle of arrows.

"You never bring enough."

"...Hmph!"

Nangong Si scoffed, but this was hardly the time or place to be stubborn over appearances, so he accepted the arrows and the two of them returned to their respective fights.

An hour went by in no time; they beat back masses of the vicious fiends, but even more flooded out from the ghost realm to replace them.

Li Wuxin cut down a dozen spirits in one slash, then turned to yell toward Xue Zhengyong, "We can't keep going like this, we have to fix the barrier!"

Xue Zhengyong glanced at the four golden arrays glowing from the distance in each of the four directions of the town.

He huffed out a breath and snapped back crossly, "Easy for you to say, do you know how to fix *this* barrier? Do you even have anyone who knows anything about barriers?"

“I——” Li Wuxin’s expression was sullen. “Barriers aren’t one of my sect’s specialties.”

“Then shut the fuck up! How many Yuhengs do you think there are? Chu Wanning is holding down the four critical points right now, or else if these damn ghosts get out from the blockade, everyone in Shuzhong will be done for! If us cultivators are barely holding on, how do you expect the common folk to survive?!”

“Shuzhong being done for is better than the entire cultivation world being done for! If you don’t get someone to go mend the Heavenly Rift right now, it’ll be out of our hands!”

Xue Zhengyong’s temper flared at his words, and when he swung his metal fan to summon a powerful gale toward the vicious ghosts, he let it slice open Li Wuxin’s cheek as if inadvertently. “And why should the people of the lower cultivation realm die just to keep your precious upper cultivation realm safe?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth! I’m saying that some sacrifices have to be made for the greater good! If this Heavenly Rift had happened at my Bitan Sect, I would’ve sacrificed my entire sect to keep the peace in the land!”

“What a thing to say, Li-zhuangzhu, but talk is cheap.” Tiger-like eyes round with fury, Xue Zhengyong was so angry that he ended up laughing instead. “The entrance to the ghost realm is located in my Shuzhong, it is not and never will be in your Bitan Sect, however many generations pass! So, what, the entirety of Sisheng Peak should just sacrifice itself a thousand, a million times for ‘peace in the land’?! Li-zhuangzhu, what a thing to say!”

The two were locked in stalemate, going at it while fighting off demons and fiends, when a streak of snow-white brilliance swept in from the western horizon.

Before they could even ascertain whether it was friend or foe, a burst of frenzied instrumentals came from the clouds above like a tempest, resounding and resonating as a deluge from the heavens, but also akin to a shower of arrows—for they saw no weapons, but it felt as if the glint of blades was everywhere at once, as if they could hear the braying of war steeds and see fire beacons lit up along the walls of the stronghold.

“Kunlun Taxue Palace!”

Xue Zhengyong’s head snapped up to look at that stretch of snowy radiance. This close, he could see that it was indeed a multitude of cultivators riding in on swords, each dressed in robes of frozen mist silk, with peach blossom petals drifting about their persons. All of them, male and female alike, were beautiful and gentle-looking, with their appearances frozen in their early twenties by virtue of their cultivation method.

Some of the Taxue Palace disciples stood on their swords, while others sat, half of them cradling pipas in their arms, the other half holding guqins on their knees, the chords streaming forth from the sky above, tumultuous and frenzied yet clear and flowing, making the spirits and undead below shriek in agony, yet keeping them in place as if trapped under an invisible net.

The man at their head had striking features with light blonde hair and jade green eyes. He was clothed in silken robes the color of fresh snow, with a pendant hanging at his forehead like a droplet of water, and within the collars of those robes, his neck was fair and slender, like a fragrant, delicate blossom in a porcelain vase. Kunlun was a snowy, frigid land, so he wore fox fur draped over his shoulders on top of the silken robes, adding even more poised elegance to his appearance.

He held an magnificently exquisite pipa in his arms, and his brows were furrowed as he plucked the strings with his slender fingers, luminescent petals of

peach blossoms dancing about him with every note.

"Imperial winds across four seas, waters of virtue ever clear; don not the liveries of war, for today we shall triumph."

The chords eased off slightly and he glanced down at Xue Zhengyong and company, just about to say something when an irate holler sounded from a distance away, "Mei Hanxue! You damn mutt! Why the hell is it you!"

It was Xue Meng, darting over to stand under Mei Hanxue's sword even as he kept yelling, tilting his head back to curse, "Of all the people out there, Kunlun Taxue Palace sent *your* unreliable ass?!"

Turning toward the commotion, Ye Wangxi was irritated as well at the sight of that man with his pipa and his fluttering flower petals and snowflakes.

"...It's him?"

Nangong Si: "What, another acquaintance of yours?"

"I wouldn't call him an acquaintance," Ye Wangxi was less than pleased to see Mei Hanxue, but unlike Xue Meng, who stomped up to curse him out, he turned around to leave immediately, only saying, "Just fought with him once."

Nangong Si's curiosity was piqued. "Oh? How is he? Any good?"

"Heh," Ye Wangxi sneered coldly, "He had women do all the fighting for him, how do you think he is?"

Nangong Si: "....."

Author's Notes

Here it comes!

The battle of the heavenly rift that blackened this dog from an ordinary human into Taxian-Jun in the previous lifetime! Stick your neck out, dog! The knife swings downwards!

Ch.96 This Venerable One's Hatred Born In This Life

It was no wonder that Ye Wangxi despised him; this Mei Hanxue was that "dashixiong" from the Peach Blossom Springs that got countless female cultivators to coo and squabble jealously over him.

Nangong Si had initially thought that the new arrival was some powerful character, but it only turned out to be some pretty boy that relied all on looks; all of his interest vaporized in an instant, and he turned back to the battle at hand.

Mei Hanxue glanced at Xue Meng, a little exasperated, but paid him no mind as he lowered his brows and his fingers danced over the strings of the pipa. Hearing the notes, the hundred cultivators of Taxue Palace spread out in all directions——

"Guqin division, play the Song of Alkaid^[8]; pipa division, perform the Magic-Cancelling Dance."

At his command, the ensemble changed its tune immediately, countless strong, fast-paced chords gathering in the air into a resounding refrain that

scattered the clouds.

Immediately, all the demonic fiends stopped fighting, standing in place instead with their necks outstretched and hollow stares on their faces.

Seeing this, Li Wuxin remembered that those of Kunlun Taxue Palace were not only masters of music, but also knew something of barrier mending.

Delighted, he tilted his head up and yelled, “Esteemed nephew^[9] Mei, would you happen to know how to mend the Heavenly Rift?”

Paying no heed to that gross “esteemed nephew” address, Mei Hanxue answered, “The Heavenly Rift of the Infinite Hells is beyond my abilities.”

“Ah, this...” Li Wuxin’s face paled, then he swept his sleeve and let out a long sigh.

“Hanxue, what about the barrier around Butterfly Town, would you be able to hold that down?”

The speaker was Xue Zhengyong. Sisheng Peak and Taxue Palace have always been on good terms, so Mei Hanxue, seeing a familiar senior, bowed courteously before answering, “I can try.”

“Great!” Xue Zhengyong clapped his hands together. “Go guard the barrier in the four directions, make sure the demons don’t get out, and call Yuheng back
_____”

“Yuheng Elder?”

“Ah, my damn memory, forgot you’ve never met Yuheng before. Don’t worry, you’ll know him when you see him, just look for the person holding down the barrier right now.”

“Got it.” Mei Hanxue, calm and collected, flew off toward the edge of the town with a tilt of his sword, like a shooting star upon the wind.

Nangong Si nocked three arrows onto his bow and shot in three directions at once. Between the thrumming of the bowstring, he saw Mei Hanxue shoot past with speed and grace, while the rest of the people from Taxue Palace continued to suppress the enemy with musical chords. Surprised in spite of himself, he asked Ye Wangxi, “This person seems quite capable after all, why did you call him a pretty boy who relies on women to do the fighting?”

“.....”

Ye Wangxi was baffled as well, but the fiends were moving slowly right now, presenting an ideal opportunity to take them out, so he didn’t waste time trying to figure it out, replying only, “It seems he didn’t go all out against me back then,” before turning back to the enemy and saying no more.

Four of the ten great sects were now present, making the fight against the Heavenly Rift somewhat less of a desperate struggle, but still harrowing nonetheless.

Although the fiends currently on the ground were frozen by the chords of Taxue Palace, more and more oozed out from the bloody eye connecting to the ghost realm by the minute, shrieking and howling. The force from Taxue Palace was positioned in the air, but couldn’t defend themselves while playing, so the demonic fiends rushed toward the pipa and guqin players between the clouds.

They had no choice but to divert a portion of their force to play the song of defense, instantly weakening the song of suppression and exorcism and allowing the masses of fiends on the ground to resume their frenzied rampage.

Even worse, as the door to the ghost realm opened wider still, some high level demons consumed enough of the mortal realm's Yang energy to break free of their fetters and cross into this world as well, dragging their chains and shackles behind.

These were nothing like the minor fiends from before; they were possessed of both their corpse and resentful soul in one, and were much more powerful and vicious, far beyond what the average cultivator could handle alone. Instantly, some stragglers were slammed over in one strike, their chests skewered right through by bony claws—

With a wet gushing sound, blood splattered all about as the high level demons ripped the spiritual energy-filled hearts from those cultivators and bit greedily into them, fresh blood squelching out and streaming down the rotting flesh of their faces.

Mouths covered in blood and dangling with pieces of flesh, the demons grew even stronger, plunging into the crowd and seeking their next meal like beasts of prey.

Instantly, all hell broke loose!

Xue Zhengyong shouted, "Set arrays and form groups! Stay together, don't run off!"

But some had already lost their head to fear, running about in hysterics, screaming and crying as they fled every which way. The stench of blood in the air grew stronger; the demonic fiends amassed like the tide, as did the corpses of the dead...

Letting fly arrow after arrow, Nangong Si was going all out when a hanged ghost with its blood red tongue dangling from its mouth rushed in and latched onto him, raising its claw and going straight for his chest.

Ye Wangxi was too far away when he turned and saw, all color draining instantly from his usually composed face—

"A-Si!!!!"

"Gongzi!"

In the nick of time, Song Qiutong sprung over with her sword and stabbed the hanged ghost in the arm. But she's never even killed a person before, much less a ghastly fiend like this, so she let go right after in fear, the long sword falling to the ground with a clang.

The hanged ghost lunged out at her in rage, and Nangong Si switched bow for sword to block in front of her as he yelled, "Get away from here, hurry!"

Song Qiutong's eyes glistened with tears, saying, "Qiutong's life was saved by Rufeng Sect, this one cannot possibly leave..."

Nangong Si had little experience in dealing with women, but seeing her delicate demeanor and that determination in her eyes, he felt a squeeze in his heart and couldn't help cursing under his breath as he called, "Ye Wangxi!!!"

"Ye Wangxi! Get the hell over here! Look after her for me!"

Ye Wangxi arrived covered in blood, grime and filth staining his handsome face. He grabbed Song Qiutong by the arm and said harshly, "Go find Qin-shixiong and stick with him."

"I'm not leaving, I can still help," she pleaded. "Young master, I want to stay by your side."

"Ye Wangxi, make sure you protect her!"

Ye Wangxi's face darkened immediately; being the upstanding gentleman that he was, he rarely ever showed such anger on his face.

"Nangong Si," the syllables trembled, broken. "You must have lost your mind."

Then, paying no more mind to the other two, he took hold of his sword and vaulted away back into the surging masses of undead.

More and more high level demons appeared, mixing into the crowd like daggers slicing open the stomach of the fish, peeling off its scales, glistening scales sticky with blood, rising and falling.

It was every man for himself as the fiends surrounded the living, wanting nothing more than to devour each and every one of them, drag them into the Infinite Hells. Mo Ran, Xue Meng, and Shi Mei fought back to back against the demons in all directions, but the clearing around them was shrinking as the enemy closed in. There was a wet sound as Xue Meng cut the arms off a fierce fiend, and foul blood shot several feet into the air.

The attacking fiends saw that this person was strong, and so circled around toward Shi Mei instead. Shi Mei's hands were held in a spell sign, but his spiritual energy was draining, and the waterlight array flickered in brightness...

Knowing that they won't be able to hold out for much longer at this rate, Mo Ran made up his mind, saying, "Shi Mei, put up a shield array. Xue Meng, get in."

"What?" Xue Meng got mad immediately. "You telling me to be a wimp?!"

"Just listen to me and get in! Is this the time to be stubborn about appearances? Look around you, you think we can kill this many ghosts?!"

Shi Mei said, "A-Ran, what are you going to do?"

"Don't ask so much, just do as I told you," Mo Ran gentled his tone, "it'll be alright."

The circle around them closed in even more. Mo Ran urged, "Quickly, there's no more time."

Shi Mei could only adjust his hand seal to raise a layer of blue-colored shielding array around Xue Meng and himself. Seeing the array complete, Mo Ran pulled out the weapon hidden in his sleeve and swiped it across his palm to sprinkle the array with his own blood, marking it with his spiritual energy. Then, gaze darkening, he called out in a low voice, "Get to work!"

Jiangui flared bright at his words, each leaf ablaze with the glow of scarlet spiritual energy, like so many sharp daggers hanging from the willow vine as it suddenly grew in length by tens of feet. Mo Ran closed his eyes, recalling in his mind the sight of Chu Wanning unleashing his killing technique, and when he opened them again, in his eyes were reflected the countless ghastly fiends closing in.

He whipped Jiangui high up into the sky above, sparks erupting off the vine and raining down.

Mo Ran held up his arm, his sleeve whipping in the wind.
In that moment, his silhouette seemed to overlap with that of Chu Wanning in his mind, the two moving in perfect sync.

"Wind."

A burst of force that ravaged the land and urged the very clouds above, pulling low the sky itself!

Behind Mo Ran, Xue Meng and Shi Mei watched as an enormous light array in scarlet bloomed like a red lotus from hell, fierce gales whipping the ground like formless blades as Jiangui whirling into a blur in Mo Ran's hand, sending dust and debris swirling into the air, the overwhelming force pulling countless fiends into the maelstrom and grounding them into mince!!!!

Chu Wanning's area killing technique, "Wind."
Mo Ran could already use it this well...

By the time the tempest settled down, there was absolutely nothing left in the area.

Both Xue Meng and Shi Mei wore shocked expressions when Mo Ran turned around, but he had no time to celebrate, feeling only that he was far from where he needed to be—if he had the cultivation level that he once did right now, something so trifling as a fracture in the ghost realm barrier would've been nothing to him.

"Look over there!"

Someone suddenly called in the distance.

Everyone looked up to see several contingents high up in the sky, riding in on swords from various directions, each group dressed differently and shrouded by different spiritual energies.

The Heavenly Rift of the Infinite Hells had finally urged the sects of the upper cultivation realm into action. The glowing swords touched down one after another, bringing a massive influx of reinforcements—over here were the graceful and charming personages from the Rainbell Isle, and over there were the solemn and dignified monks from Wubei Temple.

Finally, the ten great sects were all present.

Even stronger demons were crossing into this world, endless like swarming locust, but with the sudden arrival of reinforcements, they were no longer so outmatched.

At the same time, Mei Hanxue and Chu Wanning finally completed the spiritual transfer, the color of the barrier at the cardinal directions of the town changing from gold to blue.

With Mei Hanxue guarding the borders, Chu Wanning rode the wind into the center of the battle, landing gracefully where the fighting is most fierce.

He looked up at the rift in the sky, completely open by now, with some kind of immeasurable and terrifying evil vaguely perceptible from within.

He could practically feel the entity's insane strength, as if it had drunk the blood and consumed the brains of millions...

The barrier must be sealed now, or else that great evil being suppressed within the Infinite Hells will break free and cross into the mortal realm!

Chu Wanning couldn't help wondering if this was what the person behind the scenes was after, to unleash some kind of great evil from hell into this world?
But to what end?

"Shizun!"
Shi Mei called anxiously after him.

Chu Wanning turned toward the voice.

Memories from the past life once again overlaid the present scene.
"Shizun!"

Shi Mei had called for him the same way back then.
Chu Wanning turned toward the voice.
Shi Mei panted in the snow, covered in blood and grime, but his eyes were firm and determined. "Shizun is going to mend the Heavenly Rift?"

"Mn."

"But that... that's not just any fracture, that's a fracture into the Infinite Hells, how will Shizun manage by himself?"

"....."

"Let me help. I studied the defensive arts at the Peach Blossom Springs, I won't get in Shizun's way..."

It was almost as if he could hear the exchange between the two, so many years ago, that determined life and death.

Mo Ran felt his blood run cold and his head go numb. Without warning, he grabbed Shi Mei and pulled him behind himself, then shoved him into Xue Meng, yelling, "Xue Ziming, keep an eye on him! Look after him!!"

Xue Meng's eyes widened. "You going somewhere, mutt?"

"I..."

The wind picked up, carrying with it the stench of blood.

There was no flurry of snowflakes in the sky; at least some things were different from the last lifetime.

Mo Ran's gaze landed on Shi Mei, lost and helpless, feeling his heart clench but then fill with relief.

This barrier cannot be mended by Chu Wanning alone.

But aside from his three disciples, no one else had the familiarity with his spiritual cultivation to work together with him in rapport. So one of them had to go.

The wind whipped fiercely through the battlefield, thousands of miles of desperate slaughter.

Bracing himself, Mo Ran pulled Shi Mei into his arms. It was the first time he had ever held him like this so openly and directly; he held him for a moment, and then abruptly pushed him away.

Shi Mei.

This time, I'm afraid the one to die will have to be me.

"I'll go help Shizun seal the barrier," Mo Ran declared in a tone that left no room for argument. Narrowing his eyes, he directed another deep, meaningful gaze at Shi Mei.

Suddenly, he didn't care what others might think anymore, didn't care that Xue Meng was right there, didn't care that he might get rejected. He had waited for two lifetimes, loved for two lifetimes, and now he was leaving, and might not be able to come back. Standing in the ferocious wind, he wanted to say a few final words to his beloved.

"Shi Mei, actually, I..."

But just then, as he opened his mouth to speak, the roars of vicious fiends drowned out his voice.

That momentary impulse, boiling hot like lava, grew cold in that momentary pause, and in the end fizzled out.

"A-Ran, did you want to say something?"

A reflection from his past life flitted across Mo Ran's eyes; he saw Shi Mei's gentle smile from behind that half-rolled curtain.

How cruel it had been.

It had stayed with him, for his whole life until death, and it was everywhere that he looked.

The rims of his eyes a little red, Mo Ran grinned.

"Nevermind, good things can't be said twice."

Shi Mei: "You..."

"I'm off to go help Shizun. When I come back... if I still feel like telling you." Dimples deep, gaze filled with love. "I'll tell you then..."

With that, he turned and headed toward Chu Wanning.

Shi Mei won't die now.

At least he won't die in front of him.

Mo Ran suddenly felt as if the sky was more open and the ground more vast. He supposed that the figure in front of him, white robes billowing, will be the end point of this reborn life of his.

His Shizun, who held the world in his heart.

As Shi Mei lay dying, for the sake of completing the mending of the barrier, for the sake of purging the rampaging fiends, Chu Wanning had ruthlessly chosen to leave.

This time, the one to repair the barrier with him was himself. Chu Wanning despised him so much, disliked him so much, there was no way he'd put down his esteemed reputation as the Beidou Immortal to mind the life or death of someone so insignificant as himself.

"Shizun."

He came to a stop in front of him, Jiangui glowing in his hand.

"This barrier is hard to repair, let me help."

The situation was dire; Chu Wanning shot him a wordless glance in silent acceptance.

He leapt up to stand at the highest point of the Chen Manor, with Mo Ran following after.

Chu Wanning spoke, "Set the Discernment Barrier."

Following his instructions, Mo Ran moved in concert with him, one to the left and one to the right, the tips of their fingers glowing with the seal of the Discernment Barrier as they lifted their hands into the air in concert.

"Invoke!"

Their spiritual energies streamed forth from their bodies at the invocation, working in rapport and each holding down a vital grounding point of the array, using the surge of their cultivation to form a gold-scarlet barrier that expanded outwards.

Any demonic fiends touched by the barrier would shriek as if burned and flee back into the eye of the ghost realm. The barrier grew clearer and brighter by the second, and below their feet rose a pair of coiled dragon platforms formed of spiritual energy, lifting the two of them high into the skies above.

In the glaring gold and scarlet light of the barrier, the ghost eye slowly began to close, but, as if refusing to yield, the resentful spirits within grew even wilder.

The resentful energy spilling forth grew stronger with each inch of the closure, and by the time they were some thousand meters away from the rift, the corruption from within was practically palpable.

In his reborn body, Mo Ran felt as if a heavy weight was beginning to settle over his shoulders, like an immense rock weighing a thousand tons was pressing against his chest, making it hard to breathe.

Across from him, Chu Wanning's spiritual energy was still strong and steady, streaming unceasingly into the barrier.

One inch, another inch.

The corruption in the air had concentrated into one spot; it felt as if countless daggers were digging into his very flesh and bones.

"Shizun..."

As his consciousness slowly began to fade, he seemed to see memories from the past again.

Shi Mei and Chu Wanning working together to repair the barrier, and it was mere moments before the worlds of Yin and Yang would be separated once again. The vicious ghosts that were about to be deprived of Yang energy once more saw that Shi Mei's side was much weaker; they gathered together and lunged toward Shi Mei as one.

Shaa!

In only an instant, Shi Mei, who had been doing his best to maintain the balance of the barrier, was pierced right through!

The scene replayed, almost exactly the same way.

Only, this time, it was Mo Ran whose heart was pierced through by a thousand ghosts.

From the Heavenly Rift, a cascade of demonic fiends broke through the heavy clouds and punched through Mo Ran's chest in an instant. Mo Ran saw red before his eyes, and it wasn't until a moment later that he came to his senses and realized that that was his blood bursting forth from his own chest.

Drowning in the suffocating stream, he strained to turn toward Chu Wanning, only to be met with the sight of the man's pristine white robes and coldly impassive face, not even sparing him so much as half a glance.

Resentment flooded his chest.

Setting into deep hatred.

He fell from the coiled dragon platform, blood seeping from the corner of his lips, chest dyed a deep crimson.

The fall took only a moment, but it felt like an eternity, like a drowning person sinking slowly to the bottom of the sea, never again to hear the soft whispers of the living world.

Chu Wanning hadn't lifted single finger on his behalf.
Hadn't tried to stop them.
Couldn't even be bothered to glance his way.

When he fell, the scarlet spiritual energy dissipated, and just like in the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning chose to pour the remainder of his powers into the portion that Mo Ran wasn't able to mend, and, by his strength alone——

Forced the barrier shut with a thunderous bang!

But the fiends left on this side of the gate, cut off from the Yin energy of the ghost realm, immediately went into a frenzied rampage against the cultivators, mowing through countless of the living in mere moments, utterly annihilating the formations of several sects.

Chu Wanning descended. When Mo Ran fell, a layer of light had formed beneath the coiled dragon pillar to cushion his fall.

But his whole chest had been pierced through and blood pooled on the ground beneath him, no different from Shi Mei back then.

Chu Wanning beat back the fiends that rushed toward Mo Ran and, with a backhanded wave, dropped a protective barrier around him.

"Shizun..."

The person behind him murmured quietly.

"Are you leaving..."

Mo Ran coughed out blood, but there was a grin on his face.

"Are you leaving again?"

Outside the flowing golden barrier, that person continued to stand with his back to him. Mo Ran opened his mouth, but his throat filled suddenly with the taste of iron.

"Chu Wanning, are you made of wood? You don't know what it is to feel sad, to be selfish, do you..."

"Chu Wanning..."

"Chu Wanning..."

His vision blurred. He was covered in wounds from the battle; blood streamed from a cut on his forehead, flowed into his eyes, and as he threw his head back and laughed with abandon into the skies above, laughed as if he had gone mad, bloodied tears fell down his face.

His voice broke on a sob. "Chu Wanning, turn around! Look at me...are you really going to leave..."

Won't you look at me one last time.

I'm dying.

Back then, when it was Shi Mei, you had at least spared him a glance.

You...

Do you truly...

Dislike me this much? Look down on me this much?

Why else would you refuse to look at me, just this one last time? Why won't you turn around?

"Shizun..."

His eyes brimmed with blood and tears.

The last thing he saw, through the golden barrier, was the back of that lone person's white-robed figure as he walked away.

To go suppress demons.

So, in the end, it turned out that in his heart, there was no one else less important...than Mo Weiyu.

Ch.97 This Venerable One...

"Mo Ran, Mo Ran."

Someone seemed to be calling him.

He opened his eyes, bleary and dazed, to an unfocused white silhouette. Vaguely, he felt as if this person looked like Chu Wanning, but at the same time he also didn't quite dare to believe it. He felt that person's hands folded over his chest, channeling an unbroken stream of spiritual energy into the wreckage there that was still bleeding nonstop.

So warm...

Who?

He blinked ardously, trying to get a look at that blurry figure.

"Mo Ran..."

"Sh-Shizun?"

He fought down the blood welling in his throat to ask in a murmur.

He felt something warm and wet fall on his cheek. Slowly, his vision cleared up enough to see a pair of phoenix eyes, softly beautiful with a hint of melancholy like the apricot blossoms of Jiangnan, against a face that was deathly pale and stained with blood. Mo Ran was at a loss as he stared dazedly at him—he had never seen such an expression on Chu Wanning's face before.

His Shizun had always been coldly impassive, but the person before him now was crying.

Mo Ran reached up with a hand, wanting to touch, wanting to check if it was real or just the hallucinations of a dying man. But, the tips of his fingers mere inches from that person's face, he paused.

Sometimes, hating someone was a kind of habit. If, suddenly, he shouldn't hate him anymore, then he wouldn't know what to do.

He didn't dare touch.

He was afraid it might be real.

But also afraid it might not be.

Behind Chu Wanning, he saw mountains of corpses and oceans of blood; he couldn't quite tell if it was the battleground at Butterfly Town, or if he had already gone to hell. He was well aware that he had committed countless evils, had sinned irredeemably, that he belonged in the Infinite Hells, never again to be reincarnated.

But Chu Wanning...

He was a good person.

Why would he be here with him, to suffer an eternity in hell?

"Just a little more," Chu Wanning's voice was distant and hazy, as if uttered through the depth of an ocean. "You have to stay awake, or else..."

He watched blood seep from the corner of Chu Wanning's mouth.

The golden light grew brighter and brighter until the person before his eyes was suddenly enveloped in the blinding glow, turning into the form of a child.

"Or else you are no disciple of mine."

"Xia-shidi!"

Chu Wanning turned into Xia Sini right in front of his eyes. Mo Ran was so shocked that his wound suddenly blazed with pain, and he passed out again before he could process a single thought.

"Mo Ran."

A voice so soft it was almost a sigh; he didn't know if it was a hallucination of the past life or a lingering murmur by his ear.

"I'm sorry, it was this master's fault..."

This again! This again!!
Chu Wanning, I don't want you to apologize, I want you——

To what?

He faltered, not knowing what it was that he wanted.
If he didn't want him to apologize, then what *did* he want him to do?

His eyes shot open. Breathing harshly, clothes soaked through with sweat, Mo Ran looked up to see a clean, tidy room, sparsely decorated.
He was back at his room in Sisheng Peak.

He actually lived...

Disbelievingly, he glanced around himself, then raised a hand that was a bit cold to feel the injury on his chest. It was wrapped in several layers of bandages; blood had seeped through the gauze and dyed it red, and it hurt a little when touched, but underneath, his heart was still beating rhythmically, powerfully, beating with the promise of the rest of his life.

He lived.

He lived!!!!

Blood coursed wildly, powerfully through his youthful body, making the tips of his fingers tremble, thrumming through his very soul.

He heard the sound of curtains being lifted. Mo Ran looked up from where he was sitting on the bed and came face to face with the beauty that had just entered. It was probably cold outside; his long black hair cascaded loosely over a white mantle lined with fur, and when he lifted those soft, bright eyes, there was a faint redness at their corners, more beautiful than any makeup.

Shi Mei hadn't expected Mo Ran to be awake already, and started a little before saying, "A-Ran? Y-you..."

"Shi Mei! Shi Mei!"

Mo Ran called his name a bunch of times, eyes bright and glittering like obsidian. He jumped off the bed, ignoring the protests of his wound, and grinned toothily while throwing himself on Shi Mingjing, hugging him tightly, ecstatically repeating over and over.

"I'm so glad! You're alive! I'm alive! It's over, it's all over!!"

The Heavenly Rift had been the greatest calamity of his past life; fiends and demons had descended from above, taken Shi Mei, and pushed Mo Ran into the abyss of sin.

It was the one thing that had kept him constantly on edge after rebirth, fearful that it would happen all over again, that he would be left all alone again, treading on the bones of those he had once loved and cared for on the lonely path toward an empty Wushan Palace.

But the heavens were not unkind to him, and everything had changed when he'd stood up, willing to die in Shi Mei's place.

He won't be all alone anymore, abandoned and rebuked by all, won't be forced to Liangshan Mountain in the dead of night, henceforth a lonely wanderer; from now on, the curse is broken——

He had truly escaped the nightmare of his past life now, truly been reborn.

Mo Ran clung to Shi Mei for a long time before letting go, his eyes bright like fireworks, glittering like the starry night.

Shi Mei stood there, dazed and unmoving, while Mo Ran wrapped his arms around his shoulders and looked down at him, smiling. They stayed like that for a long time before Shi Mei slowly broke out of his daze and leaned in of his own accord to press his forehead against the lower side of Mo Ran's jaw.

"A-Ran."

"Mhm?"

When Shi Mei lifted his face, he wore a faint smile, but his eyes were a little wet.

"I'm so glad you're ok."

Smiling, Mo Ran stroked his hair, then took his hands in his own, reassuring, "Silly, of course I'm ok, why wouldn't I be? I..."

Before he could say more, the curtain was lifted again as someone else strode in.

"Xue Meng?"

"....." What a petty guy, probably still upset that he got outdone at the Butterfly Town battle—he wore a sullen expression, and his lips were pressed into a thin line. Seeing Mo Ran up and about, he only paused for a beat before turning to speak to Shi Mei. "When'd he wake up?"

Shi Mei hesitated for a moment before answering, his voice sounding a little worried, "Just now."

"...I see," Xue Meng acknowledged, still refusing to look at Mo Ran.

Mo Ran thought to himself, *look at this little brat, sulking so much just cause he got showed up, it's like he got his candy stolen or something.*

But he was in quite the good mood, so he was willing to overlook it. Smiling, he said, "Looks like I was out for a while huh, who brought me back?"

"Who else?" Xue Meng flung his sleeve and folded his hand behind. "Of course it was Shizun."

"Ah."

Mo Ran was taken aback by his words, fragments of blurry memories from when he'd been drifting in and out of consciousness passing before his eyes. He was just so overwhelmed with shock and elation, now that he was awake, that he was even less sure if the things he'd seen back then were real or not.

He mumbled, "Shizun... Xia-shidi..."

Hearing his murmur, Xue Meng jerked almost imperceptibly before saying, stiffly, "So, you saw?"

"What?"

"That Xia-shidi is Shizun."

Mo Ran was still only guessing, and his entire face went pale at being suddenly told outright like this. "WHAT!!!"

Xue Meng's head snapped toward him, a strange expression on his face like he was using all that he had to keep something in check, "What? I thought you already knew."

Mo Ran yelped, "How would I know that! I just, when I was drifting in and out, and it was all blurry... I thought I might have seen the two of them overlapping... I..."

He thought about the time he'd spent with Xia Sini at the Peach Blossom Springs, the two of them sleeping in the same bed; he thought about when he lost control at the Rainbell Isle, the golden hair clasp that had fallen out as he tore at Chu Wanning's robes.

And the handkerchief, embroidered with a haitang blossom.

Clothing that grew and shrunk with its wearer.

The little jar of chicken soup, held tightly in Xia Sini's arms.

The way he had looked up at him and called him shixiong, and how he had patted him on the head, grinning as he said that we'll be brothers from here on out, shixiong will dote on you.

One after another, the memories materialized before his eyes and then scattered like smoke; now it was Chu Wanning, his face impassive, expression much too cold, and now it was Xia Sini, his lips pressed together, refusing to talk.

He had once said to Xia Sini that Chu Wanning was no good, that he disliked him.

He had also once patiently brushed Xia Sini's long hair.

His hair was so soft, flowing between his fingers like liquid ink.

Now that he thought about it, they really were so much alike...

Mo Ran felt like his head was going to explode. He paced in place, back and forth, muttering, "Shizun is Xia-shidi... Shizun is Xia-shidi... Shizun is..."

He came to an abrupt stop, almost crazed.

"You've got to be kidding me! How could Shizun possibly be Xia-shidi!!!"

"A-Ran..."

Mo Ran didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "S-sure they're pretty similar in a lot of ways, but... but they're not the same in the end. Xia-shidi is such a good person, how could—"

"The hell do you mean by that."

Xue Meng cut him off, pinning him with a sharp glare.

"Xia-shidi is such a good person? So, what, such a good person cannot possibly be Shizun?"

Mo Ran countered, "Of course I'm not saying that Shizun isn't a good person. It's just that Xia-shidi has always been so sincere with me, and I basically saw him as my own little brother, how am I supposed to just accept you suddenly telling me that he's actually Shizun..."

Xue Meng snarled, "Xia-shidi is sincere huh, is Shizun insincere then?"

Hearing the temper rising in his voice, Shi Mei hurriedly tugged on his sleeve.

"Young master, remember what uncle said! A-Ran just woke up, he..."

But Xue Meng shook him off, his brown eyes still fixed on Mo Ran's face, so infuriated that even the vein at his neck was throbbing, looking like a hissing viper just about to sink its venomous fangs into its prey, ready to devour.

"Mo Weiyu, you better explain to me right here and right now, why can't Shizun be Xia Sini? Where does he lack sincerity, huh? Tell me clearly, which part of him is fake to you?!"

The flood of demanding questions only annoyed Mo Ran a little; after all, it wasn't like he hadn't seen Xue Meng pissed off before—in the last lifetime, Xue Meng's temper had been more or less like this in every single one of their encounters after he became Emperor Taxian-Jun.

But still, it was irksome. Mo Ran frowned and snapped, "What's it to you? That's between me and him."

"Between you and him?" Xue Meng repeated. "Have you ever even thought about him?"

Mo Ran was so mad he laughed instead. "The hell's your problem, Xue Ziming, seriously, when'd you go mental? C'mon Shi Mei, let's go to Loyalty Hall, maybe Uncle and Shizun know what's up with him." He brushed past Xue Meng to leave, pulling Shi Mei along.

Xue Meng stood rooted in place for a while, as if trying hard to hold something down, but his restraint cracked as Mo Ran was just about to step out of the door, and he whipped around, roaring, "MO WEIYU, HAVE YOU EVER SPARED A THOUGHT FOR THIS SHIZUN OF YOURS?!"

"....."

Mo Ran only felt even more agitated; his steps halted, originally cheerful and relaxed brows drawing low into a scowl.

Shi Mei squeezed his hand, whispering uneasily, "Don't mind him, he's been a bit irritable lately. Come on, let's go."

"...Mn."

But his hand had only just made contact with the curtain, hadn't even lifted it yet, when Xue Meng's voice rang out again, stifled, inflamed and distraught, like it had leapt out from a fire.

"Mo Weiyu, you fucker, you piece of shit."

The curtain dropped back down with a swish.
Mo Ran closed his eyes, then opened them.

"A-Ran..."

Shi Mei tried to pull him back, but was gently pushed aside.

He turned his face, and then his body. The two of them were about the same age, but Mo Ran was already taller by a chunk, and he could look quite cold and menacing when he wanted to.

Mo Ran suddenly smiled, but his black eyes were deep and without the slightest hint of a smile.

He spoke, "So I'm a piece of shit now, huh."

"Xue Ziming, I've never treated Shizun with anything but respect, nor did I stand by and watch at the battle of the Heavenly Rift. The barrier to the Infinite Hells couldn't be mended by his strength alone, so I stepped up to help. Let me ask you, as his disciple, have I done anything wrong?"

"....."

"My strength falls far short of his, so I wasn't able to hold out till the end when mending the barrier. I fell from the coiled dragon pillar, but he didn't even spare me so much as a single glance, uncaring of whether I lived or died. Let me ask you again, in my shoes, would you not feel bitter and disappointed?"

"Mo Ran..."

Finally giving voice to the thing that had eaten away at him for two lifetimes, Mo Ran's handsome features twisted into something dark as he spoke of his sore spot. He forced out each individual syllable, slowly and clearly enunciating

every word. "As I see it, I've done my duty, and owe him nothing. What gives you the right to stand here in front of me and call me a piece of shit? ...Xue Meng, do you think I've never cared for him? You're wrong, I have."

"But he's made of stone," Mo Ran continued in a low voice, every word like a knife to his heart, drawing blood. "Xue Meng. Listen to me, I don't care what a powerful cultivator he is in the eyes of the world, what a prestigious zongshi, that he's Yuheng of the Night Sky, Beidou Immortal, none of that is important."

"What's important is that, at the battle of the Heavenly Rift, I nearly died. But when I begged for him to look back, spare me a glance, he wouldn't even give that to me."

It was such a chilling, enraging thing.

But he was strangely calm as he spoke of it; only his eyes were a little red.

"And, Xue Meng, I can guarantee you—no matter who it was falling from the pillar back then, even if it wasn't me, even if it was you or Shi Mei, he wouldn't have saved you."

Because I saw it with my own eyes.

He had turned and left his own disciple's body to cool in the snowstorm that filled the sky.

"There's nothing more important than his good name as the Beidou Immortal, after all," Mo Ran sneered coldly. Maybe it was the poor lighting, but he looked a little forlorn.

"You'll live if you're lucky. Die if you're not."

His last word was still lingering in the air when there came a blur before his eyes alongside a rush of wind.

The room was narrow and Shi Mei was behind him, so Mo Ran couldn't dodge even though he sensed it coming, for fear of letting him come to harm, so he stood his ground and took the blow.

Xue Meng lunged at him like a cheetah, gripped him by the collar, and a loud 'PA!' rang out in the air as Xue Meng slapped him across the face, holding nothing back.

Getting slapped out of the blue like that, Mo Ran's temper flared as well. He twisted his wrist to seize the raging youth, snarling through gritted teeth, "Xue Ziming! The fuck do you think you're doing?!"

Xue Meng didn't answer, instead roaring, "Mo Weiyu, you bastard!!"

He had absolutely no interest in talking it out, rampaging like he was on something with no sense or reason to speak of, getting into a brutal brawl with Mo Ran right there in that desolate little room, going at each other's throats like a pair of trapped beasts, like they wanted to rip each other to threads, tear one another apart and swallow the other, blood, bones and all. A single lamp flickered in the room, casting their maddened silhouettes against the wall of stone, like a shadow play of beasts tearing into one another, like a picture of raging demons.

Suddenly, Mo Ran heard Xue Meng choke back a sob.

It was so quiet that he thought he must have heard wrong.

But just as he thought that, several drops of tears landed on the back of his hand.

Xue Meng suddenly let go of Mo Ran and shoved him away, then curled up on the ground, wrapping his arms around his knees, and started bawling miserably right there.

Mo Ran's cheek was still red and swollen, but he was utterly stumped at this turn of events, thinking that it wasn't like he'd actually pulled out any deadly

moves, surely he hadn't hurt him that bad, and besides, it was this cousin of his who threw the first punch to start with, why all of a sudden...

He was still puzzling it over when he heard Xue Meng's voice, screaming hoarsely between broken sobs.

"How could you say he didn't save you! *How could you say he didn't save you!*"

Tears rolled down his cheeks, impossible to stop.

To the side, Shi Mei saw that Xue Meng couldn't keep things under wraps after all, so he sighed and, looking down, said no more.

Xue Meng choked out between sobs, "He'll be so sad if he heard you say that from down below^[10]..."

These words were too sudden, Mo Ran couldn't quite process them immediately. He asked in a daze, "What?"

Xue Meng only kept crying. His venomous fang had pierced into Mo Ran's neck, but it had also pricked himself.

He wept so miserably, so brokenly, wiping desperately at his face, at his eyes, his gaze flickering between ferocity and sorrow.

He wouldn't get up from where he crouched on the floor.

He stayed there with his face buried in the crook of his arm for a long, long time.

Mo Ran felt a slow numbness climb up from the bottom of his feet, until his entire body felt frozen.

He felt his lips move. Heard his voice ask.

"Xue Meng, what did you just say..."

Xue Meng cried for a long time, or maybe it wasn't actually that long at all, only that it felt like far too long to Mo Ran as he waited for that thunderous jolt of an answer.

"Shizun..." Xue Meng finally choked out, "he's gone."

For a moment, Mo Ran had nothing to say. His whole body felt cold; distantly, he heard the words, but he couldn't seem to understand them.

Gone?

What do you mean gone?

Gone where?

Who's gone... who's gone!!!

WHO'S GONE!!!!!!

Xue Meng lifted his head slowly; there was hatred in his eyes, and mockery, and the deepest pain and loathing.

"Do you know why he didn't look back?"

"....."

"Father said that sealing the Heavenly Rift took all that he had. Did you think you were the only one struck by the fiendish energy of the ghost realm? The Discernment Barrier is twinned! Whatever damage you took, he suffered the same! It's just that he endured it, and said nothing of it to anyone."

Mo Ran felt a droning between his ears.

When he didn't save Shi Mei in the previous lifetime, was that also because...

Mo Ran didn't dare finish the thought. The tips of his fingers trembled.

"No way... but he was so poised..."

"When had he ever been anything but poised in front of others?" Fresh tears welled up and overflowed in Xue Meng's eyes as he spoke, "All of his spiritual energy had already been exhausted by the time he came down from there. Why do you think he put a protective barrier around you and left without looking at you?"

Xue Meng's words dripped with tears of blood.

"Shizun knew he couldn't hold out for much longer. His cultivation was high, so all the fiends would be drawn to him the moment he showed any weakness... Mo Ran, Mo Ran... did you think he left because he abandoned you..."

Mo Ran: "....."

"He left to protect you! Mo Weiyu! So that you wouldn't get caught up in that!"

"The fiends went berserk when the Infinite Hells closed, the battle dragged on till nightfall, countless were killed or injured, who had time for you?! Even my father didn't know you were gone until he was already back at Sisheng Peak with an injured Xuanjii Elder," Xue Meng paused for a moment, breathing harshly, before forcing the rest of the words through the tightness in his throat. "Mo Weiyu, he was the one who brought you back... he was the one who took the pill that lets him recover his original form, so that he could pull you from the bloody wreckage, from the mountain of corpses, he was the one already covered in wounds himself, but still gave you the last remnant of his spiritual power..."

"No way..."

"He was the one who brought you home; you were still unconscious, and his spiritual energy was completely drained. He was no different from an ordinary person at that time, couldn't use any techniques at all, not even a communication spell. He could only carry you on his back and climb up the stairs of Sisheng Peak, step by step..."

"No..."

"Over three thousand steps... he... without any spiritual power..."

Mo Ran closed his eyes.

He could almost see, under the pale moonlight, Chu Wanning carrying himself as he was on the verge of death, climbing slowly up those endless stairs, white robes stained bloody.

That person had been so distant and unreachable, so pristine and untarnished.

Beidou Immortal, Yuheng of the Night Sky.

Mo Ran's throat felt tight, and his voice shook when he spoke, "No way... how... did he..."

"I wondered the same," Xue Meng stared into the distance at a loss, the rims of his eyes red.

"When I saw him, I thought that surely I had gone mad, that I was seeing things. Because I was also thinking," he sighed the rest, "how...did he..."

"No way..." Mo Ran suddenly let out a sob and clutched his head, murmuring helplessly, "No way..."

"The stairs are still stained with a trail of blood; that's the road he took to bring you home." Xue Meng's hatred made him ruthless. "Go look for yourself, Mo Ran. Go look."

"NO WAY!!!!!!"

Shock and helplessness beyond what he could bear sent Mo Ran into a rage. He grabbed Xue Meng without warning, hauled him up off the ground, and slammed him against the wall, his face twisting into something bestial.

"No way, no fucking way! How could he have saved me? He's always disliked me, always looked down on me!"

"....."

Xue Meng said nothing for a moment, then suddenly grinned miserably.
"Mo Weiyu, it's not that he looked down on you."

In the flowing candlelight, Xue Meng lifted his eyelashes, clumpy with tears, and leveled him with a gaze filled with hatred.

"It's that I look down on you."

Mo Ran: "....."

"I look down on you, Xuanji Elder looks down on you, Tanlang Elder looks down on you... who the fuck do you think you are," Xue Meng chewed up the words and spit them in Mo Ran's face. "You son of a bitch."

"YOU——!"

Xue Meng burst out laughing all of a sudden, tilting his head back to look up at the dim ceiling. "Mo Ran, out of the entirety of Sisheng Peak, the one who thought the most highly of you was him. But this is how you've paid him back."

He laughed and laughed until he squeezed his eyes shut and tears began to fall again.

This time, he wept quietly.

"Mo Ran, your Xia-shidi, my Shizun, he's dead."

Mo Ran had been bitten by the most venomous snake in the world. Startled, he abruptly let go as if burned, and stumbled backwards, finally understanding those words for the first time.

His entire body began to tremble.

Xue Meng suddenly called to him, "Ge."

Mo Ran continued backing away, but his back collided against the ice cold wall; there was no escape after all.

Xue Meng finally stopped crying.

But his voice was flat, like he was dead.

"Ge, we don't have a Shizun anymore."

Author's Notes:

Big white cat's talking corpse: [thankning jjwxc readers]

Pup: "....."

Ah, forget it, pup 1.0 is glitching right now, 1.0 OS corrupted, give him some time alone to digest the truth. Mengmeng, you do it.

Xue Mengmeng: [rest of the thanks]

Bonus suffering:

http://seven771.lofter.com/post/2631b4_12e77a7e4

<https://twitter.com/ruoyeahs/status/1116345134746968065?s=21>

https://twitter.com/hv_micha/status/1143214049972428801?s=21

[1] 天音 Tianyin-Sound of Heaven

[2] 进贤冠 looks like this

[3] 李无心 Wuxin means heartless

[4] 杵臼之交 an idiom referring to people who are friends regardless of status or means, but the literal reading of the words is friendship of mortar and pestle. The idiom finds its origin in a story: During the Eastern Han dynasty, a scholar named Gong Shamu, in order to raise enough money to attend the Imperial College, donned plain clothes and went to work at the residence of an official named Wu You, pounding rice (using mortar and pestle). Wu You found him to be cultured and eloquent, and so made friends with him and paid for him to continue his education. Gong Shamu went on to become a principled and accomplished official.

[5] Homonym to “Very Smart”.

[6] Referring to “Xia Sini” here, which is a homonym to “Scare you to death”.

[7] 聚沙成塔 many grains of sand accumulated becomes a tower, proverb meaning that many small amounts accumulate to make a large amount. In this instance, it's the name of a technique/method.

[8] 瑶光 Yao Guang, English name Alkaid or Benetnasch, leftmost star in the Big Dipper

[9] They're not related by blood, Chinese culture is just really casual about referring to people who aren't blood-related to you as brother/sister/aunty/nephew etc etc

[10] Reminder: underworld =/ hell, everyone who dies goes to the underworld